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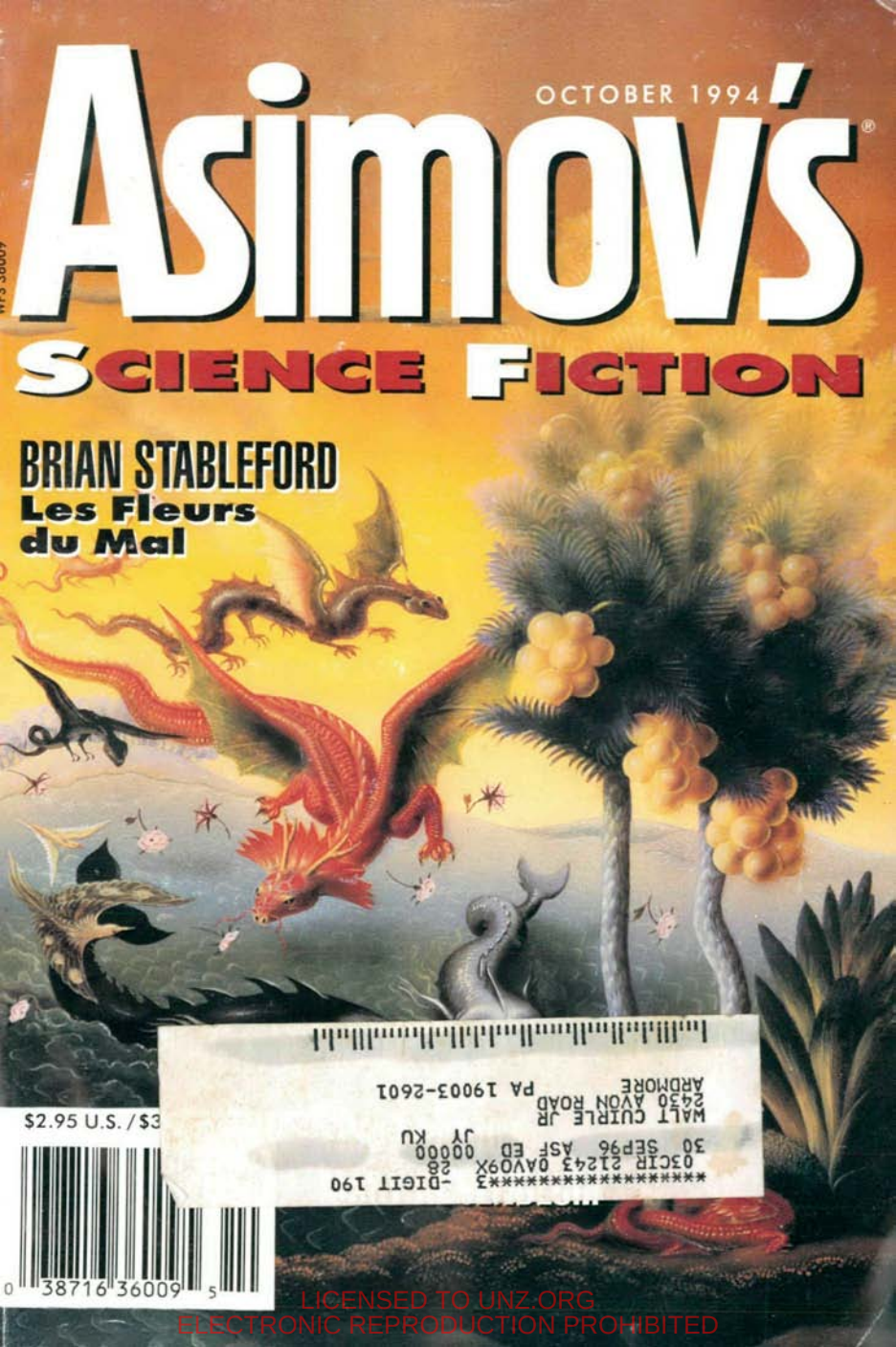

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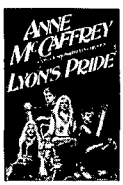

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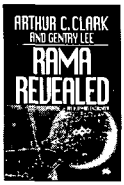

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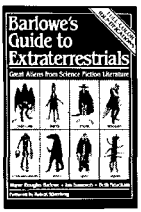

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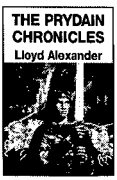

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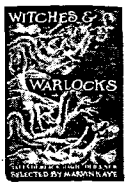

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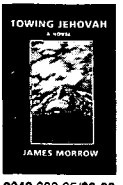

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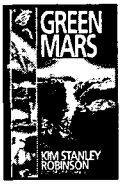

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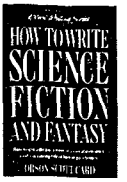

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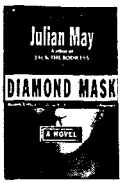

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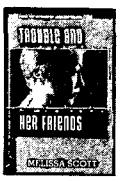

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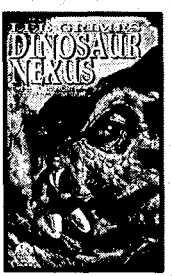

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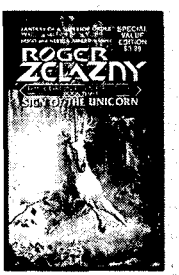

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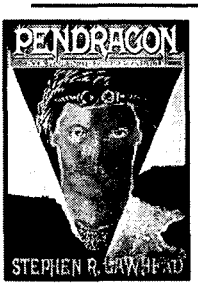

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

I spent some time last year in Prague, Budapest, and Vienna—three of the capital cities of the late nineteenth-century esthetic movement known as Art Nouveau. (Or Secession, or Jugendstil, or Arts and Crafts, or several other things depending on which country is your point of reference.) In jewelry, in glassware, in furniture, in ceramics, in painting, and especially in architecture, the Art Nouveau pioneers of Europe and the United States brought a startling new look to things as the old century was dying.

Almost literally wherever you turn in the central sections of those three cities you see splendid and spectacular examples of Art Nouveau architecture that were built between 1893 or so and 1910. Bold, dramatic forms, uninhibited ornamentation, the characteristic sinuous lines and startling use of color, the whole array of *fin-de-siècle* exuberance, mark these buildings. In a host of ways they represent a shout of joy at the coming of the glorious Twentieth Century: a revolution in the arts heralding an expected revolution in society, when the bad old ways would at last be put aside and a wondrous new epoch of progress and reform would arrive. For me the philosophy of the entire movement is symbolized by the gigantic female figures who stand atop one of the two amazing Art Nouveau apartment houses on Vienna's Linke Wienzeile, built by Otto Wagner between 1898 and 1899—hands cupped to their open mouths as they halloo down the decades toward us, ecstatically celebrating the arrival of the bold new era with a great echoing whoop.

Of course there is nothing nouveau about Art Nouveau any more. Names may remain forever young, but time marches inexorably onward. New College in Oxford was founded in the fourteenth century; the New Synagogue of Prague dates from 1453 or thereabouts; and Art Nouveau, that youthful movement founded in the closing days of the nineteenth century, is itself a century old, a brief, quaint, and picturesque interludé in the history of art. For the clock has continued to tick and now another *siècle* is about to hit the *fin*; the weary old twentieth century is tottering off the stage, and we are all too aware how inglorious much of it has been. (Were those ladies who greet the new century atop the Linke Weinzeile building halloo-

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ing to Adolph Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Joseph Mengele, the Ayatollah Khomeini, Lee Harvey Oswald, Pol Pot, and the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere? Were they celebrating the battle of Verdun and the bombing of Hiroshima? Cheering the imminent arrival of the hydrogen bomb, Auschwitz and Buchenwald, AIDS, the semi-automatic pistol, the Greenhouse Effect, and the Home Shopping Network? I wonder.)

The twentieth century was replete with wonderful things, of course—give me a few minutes and I'm sure that I can think of some—but on the whole it has turned out to be something less than the epoch of utopian wonders that the young artistic rebels of Vienna and Budapest and Prague were anticipating. And as the century turns once again, just a few years from now, we once more find ourselves in the position of hoping that the assorted pockmarks and scars of the late and unlamented outgoing era will somehow miraculously all be healed by the simple changing of a major digit in the date.

It does seem as though the end of a century, arbitrary event though it is, usually brings with it some sort of apocalyptic upheaval in art and design. The curlicues and squiggles and wriggles of Art Nouveau were the nineteenth century's way of saying farewell to itself. The eighteenth century ended not only with a revolution in France and a successful war of independence in the

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Thirteen Colonies of North America but also with the outburst of Romanticism in the arts, bringing us Beethoven, Delacroix, Byron, Shelley, Keats. And I suspect that the parallels could be traced back even farther.

The signs of a century-ending revolution in artistic style have already manifested themselves, of course, in our own day: I mean the *fin-de-siècle* apotheosis of punk in all its various forms, from purple hair to MTV, along with striking developments in screen-saver art, body sculpture, and graffiti design. (The artistic styles of the Sixties, which some might see as a premature outburst of *fin-de-siècle*ism, were in fact primarily reactionary, a throwback to Art Nouveau in most respects.) A fifteen-minute-long stroll down any crowded urban street today would leave no doubt in the mind of a visiting time traveler that yet another century is rumbling toward its close and a new one is peeking slyly at us out of the very near future.

There will, I should note here, be some disharmony in the ranks when it comes to the matter of how to determine when the new century has actually begun.

The pedants and formalists—I belong to both groups, I guess —will argue that the twenty-first century will not actually get into operation until January 1, 2001. They will point out, in tones that become increasingly hoarse and faint, that the *first* century covered the hundred years from A.D. 1 to A.D. 100 (check it out on your fingers if you doubt the total), the *second* century therefore had to begin in A.D. 101, and so on and so on down the line until we arrive at the dawning of the twenty-first century on the first day of the year 2001.

Sure. But tell it to the Marines.

You will begin hearing about the new century in streams of endless stultifying erroneosity from the media, starting just a couple of years from now. Reviews of the highlights of the outgoing century will pop up all over your television screen, and magazines and newspapers will be full of lists of highlights—the Top Ten or Top Hundred movies, books, massacres, assassinations of the century. Then there will be all the speculative pieces about the marvelous things that the twenty-first century is going to bring, the interviews with good old Arthur C. Clarke and Fred Pohl and, for that touch of visionary youth, kids like Bruce Sterling and William Gibson. And something like 99 percent of these pop-media preview items will tell you in resonant and portentous tones that the new century arrives on January 1, 2000.

That date will imprint itself on the public consciousness with the same maddening inevitability that saw the incomprehensible "I could care less" come to have the meaning of its literal opposite "I *couldn't* care less," so that anyone using the phrase in its correct sense (for example, Mssrs. Clarke, Pohl, Ster-

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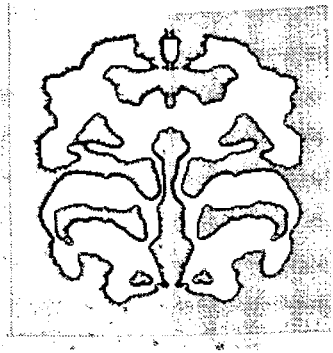

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ling, and Gibson, uttering mild protests and corrections during their interviews) draws puzzled glances. *Obviously* a year that starts with a two instead of a one has to belong to the new century. It feels righter that way, doesn't it? (As a matter of fact, it does—even to pedants like me.)

Piddling arithmetic consistency will beyond any doubt be drowned out by the roaring tide of the popular consensus; the twenty-first century will commence, by common agreement, on the First of January, 2000 A.D.

(The late Dr. Asimov would have observed, at this point in the discussion, that a good deal of the population couldn't care less about our idiotic little semantic squabble, for they are living in other centuries of their own and quite content with that. As I write this, the orthodox Hebrew world is in the fifty-eighth century—dating from the moment of the creation (reckoned by the orthodox as having occurred in 3761 B.C.—whereas in the Islamic world the present century is the fourteenth, dating from Mohammed's flight from Mecca to Medina in A.D. 622, and there are various Hindu, Chinese, and Japanese chronologies as well. For purposes of international convenience all these peoples take the trouble to keep track of the Christian-era dates, but very likely they are a lot less concerned about the impending change of label than we are.)

So be it. One way or another, the twenty-first century is just around the corner—less than six years from now by popular count, seven by formal. A mere eyeblink, so to speak.

I think of those big concrete ladies atop Otto Wagner's apartment house on the Linke Wienzeile, shouting their greetings to our century of flame. I wonder just what it is that we will be saying hello to, just a few years from now, when we pour the champagne and toot our horns to the incoming twenty-first. ●

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3. All entries meeting the above-mentioned criteria will be read and considered and the best story (based on its editorial merits) will be selected as the winner. Winner will be notified by mail. No transfer or substitution of prize allowed. In the event that no entries meet the minimum standards established by Ms. Lurie, Nan A. Talese/Doubleday reserves the right to not award the prize. Winner will be required to execute an affidavit of eligibility and release, which must be returned within 14 days of notification or an alternate winner will be selected.
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YLEM

Eliot Fintushel

Eliot Fintushel, a baker's son from Rochester, New York, has won the National Endowment for the Arts' Solo Performer Award twice. He now resides in Glen Ellen, California, with his wife and young daughter. This new writer, who has previously published one story in *Tomorrow SF*, marks his first appearance in *Asimov's* with "Ylem."

Illustration by Steve Cavallo

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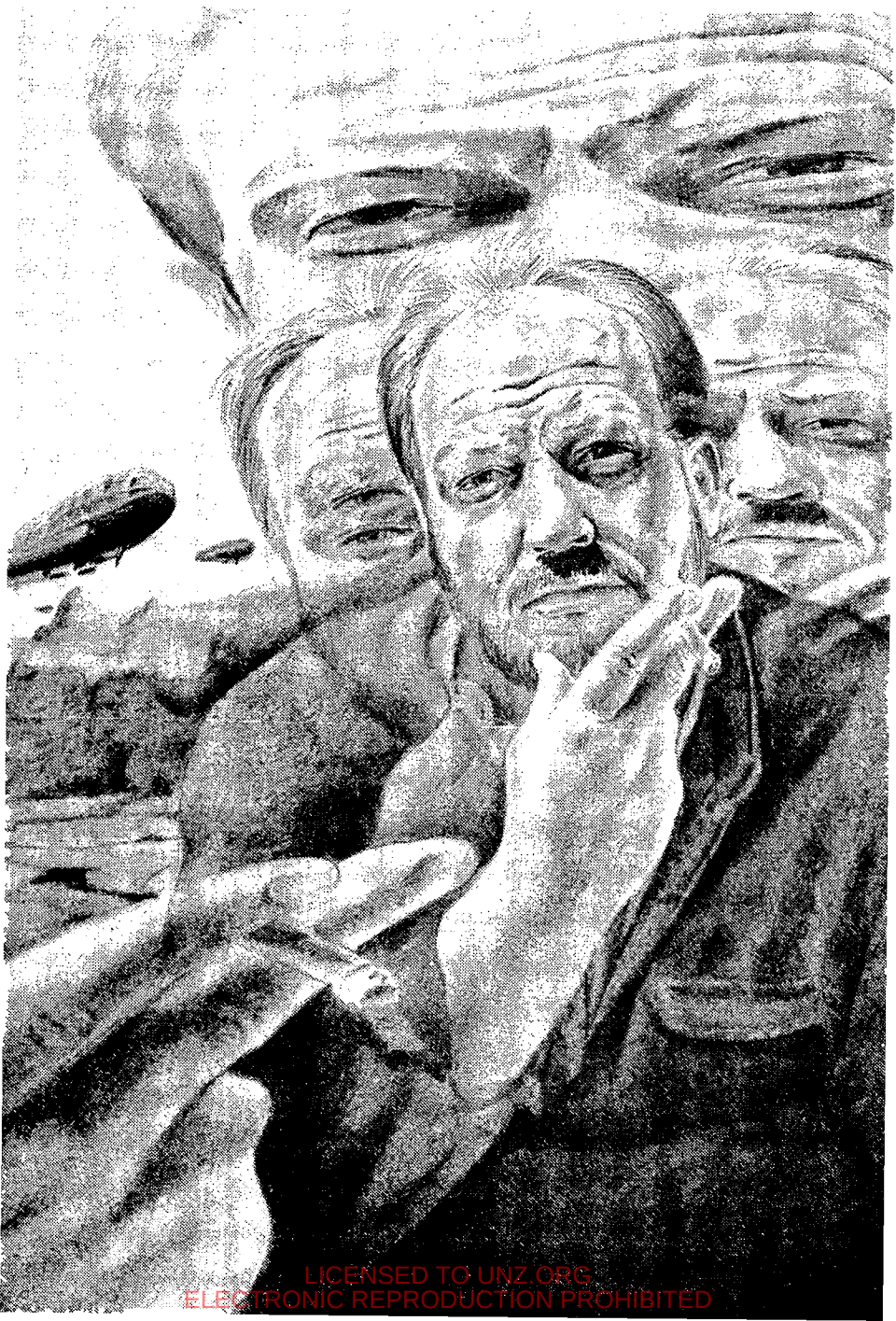

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The Manhattan Muthuhs were a Puerto Rican street gang that fled New York City to become hippies in Santa Fe. They used to sit outside El Centro, the crash pad run by an eccentric Catholic priest, and watch the sun set over the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. As the sky colored and darkened, they would drum wildly on anything a man or woman could hit. Then they would spread their army rolls and crash.

One night, hitching through, I shared a ratty sofa with one of the gang leader's girlfriends, while a dozen Muthuhs snored on the floor. If we rolled off the sofa, we'd fall on two or three of them. I heaved and pressed and jammed and ground, unable to make an end of it with Sunshine's girl, while she sleepily let me poke. Nobody seemed to mind. Over and over and over, the whole time we were at it, a scratched record (I presumed) was playing this phrase:

> *"Is that boy still climbing up the mountain?*
> *Has he faltered, or has he fallen down SCREEE!*
> *Is that boy . . . "*

And we humped and we humped. I still have a urinary tract infection that reappears from time to time, a penicillin-resistant strain of clap, which I got, indirectly, from the head of the Manhattan Muthuhs!

That night, I had my first revelatory headache. I was wedged in a crevice narrower than my skull. Iron was melting and streaming red hot into my eyes, my ears, my mouth and nose. An avalanche thundered around me, and the sky swarmed with snakes, noxious flowers, and searing lights.

My second headache came in 1966, as I walked along the Susquehanna, thinking how nice it would be at the bottom, dead. When the big blackout hit New York, I thought it was me. Then came the news of a mechanical failure at the generating plant in Niagara Falls.

I had a headache like a mine cave-in. Phantasms and fireballs burned the sky all over Broome County. Again I was deafened as if by an avalanche, and I couldn't shake the smell of rock dust—lime and sulfur.

Now, twenty-seven years later, I know—

1. The blackout: it wasn't caused by a power plant breakdown.
2. The song: it wasn't from a skipping record.
3. My "symptoms": they were a perception of reality.

Now I know, because I just had the headache again, like an earthquake demolishing a rock wall, and the wall is down, and I see the truth.

The occasion for my third headache was a visit from an old college

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friend with whom I once shared an A-frame in the hills above the Susquehanna. Siggy was passing through Sonoma, where I now live, on business. In college, he and I used to talk the way some people dance, cutting incredible figures in the mind, staying up late and planning great works, right up to the day the ambulance came and took him away, babbling and shrieking, to the state hospital; that was a few days before the big blackout. They eventually gave him shock treatment, and his parents, immigrants, concentration camp survivors, took him home to Long Island to recover, while *they* got worse.

It had been a sort of contest between us, which of us would crumble first, he in his mania, or I in my depression. Siggy won.

He seemed okay now, by and large, if somewhat dried out. He had a beer belly and a family and a gold Bulova that he frequently consulted. The wallet photos of his wife and kids could have been cut from an ad for home insurance. He chain-smoked, however, and ate everything in my refrigerator without tasting a morsel. Every pocket in his brown sports jacket had a pack of Luckies in it, except for one with a bag of Bull Durham and papers—for emergencies.

At about two in the morning, he lit a cigarette scavenged from one of his ashtrays and said, "So tell me, Eliot, how long have you been with us?"

I laughed, and he laughed back.

"No, really," he said. "How long?" Pinching the butt between his knuckles, he stretched and yawned, allowing himself to make a grotesque, sleepy face while he waited for me to answer.

"What do you mean?" I said. My head was starting to throb. I looked out the window, alarmed to hear someone start to mow their lawn at two in the morning; then I realized it wasn't a lawn mower.

"You've never given me any reason to doubt your loyalty in all these years," Siggy said. I'd seen reversible jackets before, but this was the first time I'd seen one reverse itself. Now it was red and gold. But the light was changing—maybe that was it. "And your supervisors tell me they can always depend on you, Elly, even when the other guys are frigging the dog."

"Supervisors?" I said. "What *is* this? A scene from some movie? I don't know what I'm supposed to say."

"Just say thank you, my boy. I'm sending you on a very important mission." How had he turned the cigarette into a fresh cigar? I was sure it was one of Siggy's old mind games, and I worried that he was taking it too far, that he would go off the deep end, as he had back in '66. "You're gonna be one big man when you get back, Elly."

I said, "I like my job the way it is." Where did that come from? I just found myself saying it. "I like everything, really. I *am* grateful, Mr.

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Duba, but couldn't you get someone else?" My head hurt so bad I had to squint to keep the light from stabbing me.

"Duba?" Siggy said. "Who's Duba?" The cigar was back to a cigarette butt. His jacket had again reversed itself. "Have you got anything else to eat in this place?"

Two A.M., and it was already light outside. I looked out the window at the brilliant, blue sky, filled with dirigibles; I could make out the figure of a bull painted on the hull of each one. When I looked back, Duba was peering at me through a thick cloud of cigar smoke. "Come on," he said, "don't put me on. What are you doing, trying to wheedle more dough out of me? I'll give you dough, believe me. You must have a little ambition, a guy like you. You weren't cut out to be a *now lubber*."

"I don't got any ambitions," I said.

"What about Topsy? You could take her along, you know. In fact, I *want* you to take her along. She knows the route, Elly."

There were the flowers in the air, the snakes and the exploding lights, the thunder, and the pain so sharp I could see it, like fissures wedged open in the bones of my face. "Topsy?" I said. "Please don't talk about Topsy."

"Your little secret, huh? Look. Let's level. She's not gonna stay with you, Elly. They never do." Topsy was a chrono-anomaly. She had just shown up in my apt one day when I got home from work. That was about the same time that the helium ratios changed and the dirigibles started showing up—retroactively.

Look, I know it—if not for Topsy, I never would have had a woman at all. I'm a good chess player though. Some people think I'm a *great* chess player, only I don't like to beat everybody all the time, because of how it makes them feel bad.

"On the other hand, Elly," Mr. Duba told me, "if you take her along on this mission, see, she'll love it. She'll love *you*, boy, because you know where you're going? You know where I'm sending you?"

"No, Mr. Duba. Where?" Gee, my head hurt something awful. I was ready to get out of there and go back to the basement offices and sort the rest of the guys' tools. What do I know about missions and stuff? That was hot air, if you ask me, except if I could get to keep Topsy that way.

"*Ylem*, Elly. Right back to the *ylem!* And that's where Topsy comes from, you know. That's her *home*, boy. If you take her there, believe you me, she'll love you to pieces!"

"I know it," I said. "You're right. I'm gonna *do* it." Something happened to me then that I don't like to talk about, but my eyes kind of went out of focus, and I thought for a second that Mr. Duba was somebody else. I

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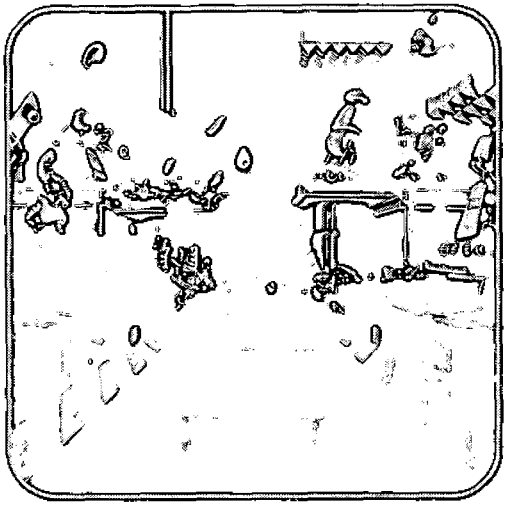

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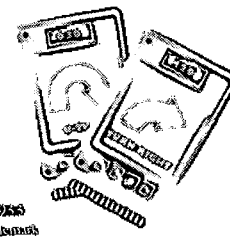

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thought he was an old pal of mine from college. But I never went to college. Then he was Mr. Duba again, and I felt better.

Topsy was lying in the corner, listening between the stations, like she always done, to radio static. She had a name for it: "relic background radiation." But I could beat her at chess. I could hardly see her, black as the shadow the way she is, even her gums and teeth and the "whites" of her eyes. I told her, wear white at night, but she didn't care about nothing but static. She said, "It's telegrams from home."

How come she remembers stuff that never happened? How come she knows the colors and sizes of stuff that don't exist and the dates of birthdays for people that never was born? It's all on account of how she got here straight out of nowhere from Mr. Bull screwing in the deep past.

When I told her about our mission, she turned off the radio for the first time since a month, day and night, day and night, and she put her arms around me and pulled me close till I went inside of her. Then we did it, like she showed me.

After, she says to me: "That bastard Duba is up to some bad shit, Elly, but maybe it'll get me home." She knows me pretty good. She can see what I'm thinking. She gives me a peck and says, "Elly, you dear, it'll be a home for you too. Nobody'll take advantage of you there, we'll be together forever, and when you win at chess, you won't have to be afraid of making people angry." So I smile big.

My face above it, the breeze from the flushing toilet revived me a little. Siggy laid both hands on my shoulders. "Can I get you anything?" he said. Just the sound of his voice was excruciating, but I had stopped heaving.

"No," I said. "I'm okay. I'm okay." I pushed my head and shoulders, a leaden mantle, up from the toilet seat. "Siggy, what's *ylem?*"

He laughed, "It's Greek to me, partner." I started to close my eyes and let my head slide back down, when he said, "Hey, I was just kidding. It really *is* Greek . . . no, Latin! Don't you remember? We used to toss that word around back in the A-frame days. It's supposed to be before the Big Bang, when everything was in one place the size of a pinhead."

"Does it send out radio signals?"

"Sure, Doubleyew Big Bang FM. Actually, it *does,* in a way. Some guys working for Ma Bell found it in the sixties. Very faint. Very cool. A few degrees above absolute zero. Static. The afterglow of the Big Bang. Very funky. You want some water?"

"Relic background radiation?"

"That's it. So what are you asking *me* for?"

And then we were sitting, Topsy and I, in harsh sunlight, on a barren

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salt flat a few hundred yards from the base of a rocky cliff, and I really was okay. The only thing was, I was having some trouble making one thought follow the last pretty good, and Topsy was in the middle of jabbering at me like no tomorrow, which I don't like, and she knows it too, so why *do* it is what I want to know, huh? Also, some Zeppelins were grouping up on the other side of us from the cliff, and it made me nervous, and I think they were making Topsy talk fast like that too.

She was showing me some stuff from her pockets, which she had two of, one on either hip, with stuff in them, but *I* didn't get to have but one. She was saying, "This is a Doppler gauge. This dial sets the scale factor. Yours is exactly the same as mine, and we have to make sure they're always set the same, Elly, or things will get very confusing very fast. Are you listening to me?"

"Sure I am, Topsy," I say, "but them dirigibles aren't Mr. Duba's, and I think we should get out of here fast."

"I'm keeping track of them, Elly," she said. "You just concentrate on what I'm saying. Remember the hypodyne?"

"My head feels like it's cracking open," I said to Siggy. "I know this sounds stupid, but I have to ask you: Are my eyes open?"

"No, they're not," he said.

"Well, I can see," I said.

"Tell me what you see, Eliot."

"I'm not here. I mean, I'm not in California. I'm not in this house. I'm not even in this time, I think. I'm in a dark tube. It's like a CAT scan, but the rays are doing something to me. I think they're killing me, Siggy."

"You're fine, Elly. They're not killing you."

Then Topsy's voice: "Listen to Mr. Duba, Elly. It's the hypodyne. I'm next, Elly. I'm right after you. The hypodyne will make you into thoughts, Elly—that's one way to say it. Don't be scared. I'll be with you soon."

"That's right, my boy," Mr. Duba said. "Then you and Topsy here will be hypostatized into the timeship."

"I'm scared." That's what I wanted to say, but nothing come out. I couldn't even find my mouth. I was all hypodyned, I guess. Then when Mr. Duba talked some more, I couldn't even tell if maybe it was me thinking it instead. . . .

"Don't you worry, son. I know exactly how you feel. Like air in a popped balloon, right? It'll only be a minute. Topsy's getting hers right now. She'll be with you before you can say Duba Enterprises, Eenk! Then we'll stat you into the timeship. I know you're going to do us real proud, kiddo. Just look out for Zeppelins, heh, heh!

"No, really, Elly, I know you're going to really give those helium boys

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something to think about. Do what Topsy tells you, now! I know you will! *This is the Second Bull!"*

("Second Bull?" Siggy asked me. "He said, 'This is the Second Bull?' " Siggy dug his fingers into my shoulders, anchoring me on Sonoma Mountain.

"Yeah," I said, "like the Zen Bulls, I guess:

The Bull is sought. The Bull is tracked.
The Bull is glimpsed. The Bull is caught.
The Bull is tamed. The Bull is ridden . . .

. . . and so on. We were tracking Bull. It's a joke.")

Then I felt like I was dishwater going around and around down the drain, like, and when I was all dripped down into the pipes, then I was out cold, and when I woke up, me and Topsy was standing in the shadow of some dirigibles, and she was showing me stuff, and she was saying: "Remember the hypodyne?" and I remembered it.

She said, "We're in the timeship now, Elly. This landscape is a hypostat of the whole history of the universe. See how it looks flat for a ways and then, about two hundred yards from here, it starts sloping up, and then it's a quarter mile or so straight up? Now watch what I do with my Doppler gauge, and you do exactly the same thing, you hear?"

"You bet, Topsy girl," I said. "Easy as pie."

In my pocket I had one of the same things of what Topsy had, which they put there, and I took it out, and I looked at it, and I looked at what she did, and I did it. I punched the OUTPUT button, the blue one. Then I punched a red one and some other ones. Then I set the big thing to REDSHIFT: LOCAL SCALE FACTOR TIMES TWO, and then I fell down. Topsy helped me get up.

"You see, Elly?" she said. "We just changed the lay of the land." The ground we were standing on looked like a mountain-side now. It was slanted real steep. Also, the dirigibles were way back behind us, almost out of sight.

"This is incredible," I said to Siggy. I couldn't see him—I had ice packs over my head and eyes, and even without them, I think I could only have seen the inside of the timeship. "They've got a machine that makes time look like a rock cliff in Utah. And then there's another one that changes the scaling of the slope according to the redshift as you go back in time. It's like different powers on a microscope, only . . . "

"Take it easy," Siggy said. "Don't talk, Eliot."

" . . . Only, 'YOU ARE THERE!' " I said.

"No," he said, "*you* are there, Eliot. We're trying to get you back."

"What?" I said.

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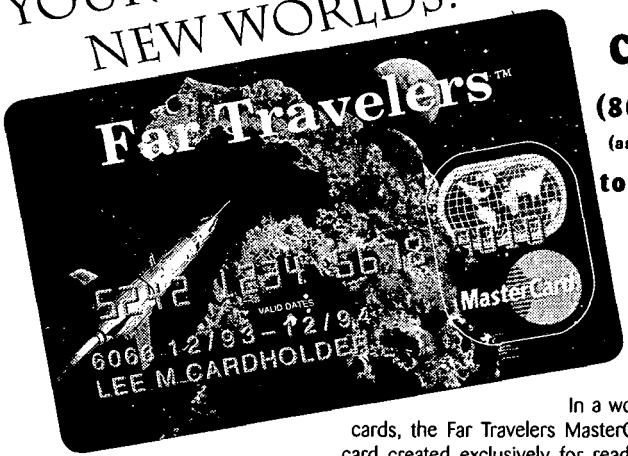

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"We're trying to get you back," is what Mr. Duba said. I mean, I thought it was Mr. Duba, only Topsy says shush, that it isn't Mr. Duba, because the dirigible people are trying to fool us so they can shoot us or stop us. They are Mr. Duba's competitors, that bum Bull, see, who made all the extra helium so they could corner some markets, when Mr. Duba's stock went sliding, and they did it by going back in *their* timeship to tinker near the *ylem* like what we're gonna do, only ours is better."

"Listen, Elly," Topsy said, "we've got to hurry. Those helium boys are on our tails. Do what I do. Switch back to the old Doppler scaling. And make sure you don't touch anything else unless I tell you. Then hold my hand and run like hell."

We started in to do our buttons, but then Topsy said, "Wait! I have to show you this, Elly." She showed me a round black ball, so black it almost looked like a hole in the palm of her hand. "If anything happens to me, Elly, and I don't make it up the cliff, you take this off me, understand? You take it all the way up to where the redshift is ten billion, almost at the summit. That's where the helium numbers got switched. Wedge it into a crack or lay it on a flake, then come back down. There's no need for you to enter the *ylem* except for me."

I said, "You're not gonna die, Topsy."

Then we did some more buttons, both of us the same. Everything flattened out, and I fell on my keester again, but I got up and reared up to run like hell. Topsy didn't even have to tell me. What am I, *stupid?* Those big helium ships were all over the sky, and they were shooting hard things at us, like rivets or sixteen-penny nails. They made little cracks and explosions of salt all over the place like you wouldn't want to step in or get in the way of, believe me. A guy could die like that.

"Take a memo," Siggy said. The cigar smoke was making me dizzy again, and I thought I might have to run back to the bathroom to vomit.

"Don't," I said. "Please. Shh!" My eyes were covered with ice packed in washcloths, but I had the idea that they were a kind of visor that would give me a real image of the state of the universe to which some land feature corresponded in the hypostat Topsy and I were traversing via the timeship.

"Push that visor up and run, Elly," Topsy was saying.

"I can't," I said. "My head hurts. I'm sick to my stomach."

"Push it up," she said. She was tugging at my hand. I had taken one stride before the visor had slid down and I had gotten mixed up on account of how I saw big lizards everywhere and the ground cracking and making oceans and stuff. "We've gone back a hundred and fifty million years, Elly. Just stay in the hypostat. Never mind the damned visor!"

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"I don't give a damn how you *feel,*" Siggy told me. "I want you to take a goddamn memo. Do you get it? Okay?"

"Sure, sure," I said. Anything to calm that voice of his. It was pushing me over the edge; I didn't want to throw up. "Sure, Mr. Duba."

"Okay. No copies, understand? This goes to Bull and nobody else. Burn your notes. The usual precautions. . . . "

I thought, do "the usual precautions" include having me killed once the deal with Bull is set? I shifted the washcloths to get more ice directly over my temples.

"Okay. Dearest P *period comma* Nice trick you pulled *exclamation point* I wake up and guess what *question mark* The helium numbers are changed going back to God's early childhood and guess who was there to cash in from time ex minus one *couple of exclamation points* What a burner on me *comma* huh *question mark* I gotta hand it to you *period* Overnight Duba is down a couple of hundred and the sky is clogged with dirigibles *period Underline* Your dirigibles *period* So you got back to the Big Bang *exclamation point*—No, wait, make it a comma; I don't want it to look like I'm too impressed—and you worked over the nucleosynthesis *comma* well I got news for you *comma* hot shot *period* I'm going back there too *comma* I'm gonna change everything back and good *comma* and I don't care if the chrono-anomalies make your head wind up sprouting from your crotch *period* My boys have got it figured out failsafe and you are not even gonna be history *comma* Bull *comma* my man *period* So how about let's make a deal before my people hit the ylem *comma* what do you say *question mark* Otherwise *comma* that's okay by me *comma* only you better get used to having piss up your nose *period* Affectionately et cetera. And get that off to Mr. Bull the day before yesterday—no, make it last Thursday. Use the executive time shuttle if you have to."

I said, "Yes, Mr. Duba," and I stumbled to the toilet to throw up.

I couldn't help it because the visor kept flipping down by accident, and then I would see some stuff and I would almost fall except I made myself stay up, and I was getting plenty of bloody scratches from them spikes and rivets, even a bad one on the back of my neck where something stuck in there. Once, my foot slid a little on a pebble, and I looked down and so the lousy visor clacked over my eyes again, and when I watched that pebble roll backward under my feet, well, it wasn't a pebble, brother, it was a whole sea full of funny fish boiling and steaming and going back and forth and forth from eggs to skeletons and winding up back there with the big lizards near to where we come from. Then I pushed the visor back up and run. Don't worry, Topsy. Here I come, and I'm fast!

Another time I got scared because the visor fell down and I got the

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feeling that Topsy was only somebody I read about in a book, because she was a jillion years ago, which she really *was* in a way, because she was so far ahead of me right then, because I stopped for a second to fix that visor.

Then, in maybe fifty yards, I stopped worrying about the stuff the dirigibles was throwing at us—big rocks was falling straight out of the sky and making holes, and Topsy said, "We've gone nearly four and a half billion years." That's what Topsy said. She was maybe fifty million years in front of me, which means behind me really, because of how the farther we went, the earlier it was; it looked like about two feet.

"We've lost time," Topsy said. "Bull can't follow us here except on foot. From here on, every step we take is a quarter of a billion years, Elly. Pretty soon there won't be any planets any more; they won't have formed yet. Not even any solid rock—I mean, in the real world. Here in the hypostat, we can still move all right. . . . "

" . . . but only on our own power," I said. Siggy was falling asleep under the reading lamp.

"What are you talking about?" he said.

"The hypostat, Siggy," I told him. "Once you get back to this point, where the redshift is about to spring up by powers of powers, you can't use any kind of vessel. You can hardly wear any clothes. The Doppler meter and the visor are a compromise. You see, you have to *mix* yourself with it, Siggy. You have to struggle in the landscape of the hypostat, become one with it. That's the only way to stay inside the timeship. Otherwise you blow out the hull to God knows where, synchronous to nothing in this world and nothing in the next."

"Oh, I get it," Siggy sighed. He smacked his lips and snuggled into the cushions on the sagging easy chair. In two breaths' time, he was asleep.

I'm taking a minute to check my bod, now that I can afford it. I smart all over, but there are bruises and scratches in only a few places. The worst is my left ham, where one of Bull's little projectiles has wedged itself. I can tug at it, but that hurts like hell, and whenever there's bad pain, like it or not, I see where I am: about four point six billion BC, with celestial rock heaps piling up around me, free-floating in space, dark snowmen rolling to planet size. I clench my eyes like little black fists, and I pull the spike out. I remember doing this before—I've learned that that's a sure sign that it never happened.

I lift my black arms like wings, to scan along the length of them for other injuries. I survey my legs and my torso. Nothing serious. Elly is dying, but he doesn't know it. The brass-colored dart embedded in the back of his neck is slow poison, Bull's calling card. There's nothing to

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be done except to hope he can make it to the summit with me before his nerve tissue starts to lose integrity.

Like the terrain of our journey back in time, shaped by the logarithmic rise of the redshift, the rate of recession of galaxies (exploding out of the *ylem*, lo, these billions of years), Elly's illness will be slight at first, then sudden and catastrophic—Witness the sheer cliff some five hundred feet ahead, erupting toward all our origin, Amitabha Buddha, the Densely Packed, *ylem*—my home.

> *Grant, Oh Amitabha, that this pathetic*
> *fool's death will help to bring me back. Grant*
> *that the bastard Duba be foiled in his*
> *machinations, and Bull in his! Let me come home!*

A quake rocked the entire landscape, throwing me into Elly's arms. We struggled to remain erect while up and down went missing, and we found ourselves half-skidding, half-tumbling forward into the collapse of the protosolar nebula. The timeship itself was suffering an attack; our hull was being battered by volleys of HHC.

"HHC?" Siggy asked me. His voice sounded strange, but I couldn't see why; the melting ice packs were pressed around my eyes, and I felt weighed down all over by something irresistibly heavy, like a lead sheet. The place smelled faintly of chlorine. Our voices echoed harshly, as if from foursquare plaster walls.

"HHC," I said. Then, hearing the sound of my own voice, I realized it: *I* was Siggy. "Hypostatized Hubble Constants."

"Mm hmm!"—the new voice.

"The Hubble constant gives you the recession rate of the galaxies, based on their distance," I explained.

"Tell me about it," the dark man said.

"Well, it isn't really a constant . . . ," I said.

" . . . I see. . . . "

" . . . Because it changes as the universe ages. But it's:

$$r = Hd.$$

Do the math . . . "

" . . . Uh huh . . . "

" . . . and you see that H, the Hubble constant, equals r over d. But d is just r times t."

" . . . Distance is rate times time? . . . "

"Yes. So you get H equal to r over r times t."

"The r's would cancel out."

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"More or less. So you get:

$$H = 1/t$$

You see? That's what they were throwing at us."

"I don't think I follow."

"It's time inverse!" I said. "The Hubble is time inverse! It kills regular time! It neutralizes it, cancels it out! You see what they were trying to do to us?"

"Take it easy. Sit back down, please. Just relax. Breathe. Sit down, please."

"What do you mean, breathe? What do you *think* I'm doing?"

"Nurse . . . !"

I always get up early, even after a very late night; it's just the way I am. When I hear that *Sonoma Index Tribune* whack the front door, my day is beginning, and never mind the clock, the hangover, or the dream sludge sticking my gears.

I was nibbling on a toasted bagel, sipping hot water—"zen tea"—and listening to the rain slashing against the wall. I'd had to settle for margarine, since Siggy had eaten all the cream cheese and the butter. He was just where I had left him, slumped in the easy chair under the reading lamp, which had been left on all night and was still on. Through my ursine yawns and lumberings about the fridge, Siggy snored. But when I unspindled the newspaper, popping off its red rubber band, he woke.

"Eliot!" he said, expanding from the cushions like a crushed sponge in water. "Jeez! I gotta get to work! What time is it? What Bull have you got to?"

"What?"

"I said, my Bulova stopped. What time is it?"

"I don't know," I said.

"You don't know what time it is?"

"Uh uh. I don't want to look yet. I'm not ready to leave infinity."

"You got the paper, though," he said.

"Guilty," I said, scanning the headlines.

I heard Siggy open the window in the bathroom, close it again as rain poured in, flush the toilet, and then urinate. "So what's the news?" he shouted. "Did Bull make that deal with Duba?"

"Yeah," I shouted back. "It looks like they came to some kind of accommodation, the bastards."

"They get you coming and going, don't they? Those dirigibles were just too good a thing. Too cheap. Too accessible."

"Too good for guys like us," I said.

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"Now they'll fix prices any way they want to. It's always the little guy who gets the shaft, Eliot."

"Don't I know it!" I said. "Don't I know it! Don't I know it! Don't I know it! Don't I know it!"

The wind was blowing right through the window glass, tearing the paper out of my hand and nailing Siggy to the wall as he emerged from the bathroom, half-zipped. It drove back his hair, throwing his necktie back like a scarf and deforming his face—escape velocity. My head hit the table, and I couldn't lift it against the wind.

The wind said, "I thought you'd see the light, Bull. There's no sense us beating up on each other. This way, everybody wins."

"I almost *had* you, you old coot!" I said. The floor was bucking in waves like a streamer on a fan. I held onto the table for dear life. "One of your guys was all right, I guess. But holy, holy, where'd you pick up the *other* one?"

"In the mail room!" the wind laughed. "You think I wanted to throw away my best people?"

"What about the good one, the black one?" I said. I had to scream just to hear my own voice. The window shattered and glass sprayed across the room. I heard Siggy cry out.

"That woman was *your* gift, big guy," the wind said. "Some joke, huh? When your boys wiggled the equations back near *ylem* to squeeze more helium out of it, we got Topsy."

"A chrono-anomaly! You son of a gun!"

"An orphan of time! Hey, if she lives, I'm gonna help her file a paternity suit against you, Bull! You gotta take *some* responsibility! Heh heh heh! I'll *get* you, big guy, right down to the Zen Bulls tattooed on your fanny! Heh heh!"

That was a good one. I knew I could make some money with this guy. He was on the ball. He even knew about the Bulls. But you had to watch him, of course. I said, "So now that we've shaken hands and smiled upon each other's countenance and squared off our attorneys, now that you've agreed to stay out of the *ylem,* friend Duba, and I've stopped strafing your chrononauts, tell me, what are you going to do with *them?"*

"With Topsy? Elly? The timeship?" the wind said. "Oh, you needn't concern yourself. Measures are being taken."

"They've broken through! It's *leaking*," I said. They were forcing cotton into my mouth and fastening me to the table. I could smell methyl alcohol from the electrodes they attached to tiny, shaved sections of my scalp. I was too groggy to resist. I tried to explain. "It's leaking *time*. Real time is streaming in through leaks in the stern." The causal fissure which formed the spine of our timeship, guaranteeing controlled disjunction

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between what happened inside and what happened out, had been violated by an HHC.

Elly was lying on his back, kicking gravel.

"Don't!" I shouted. "Every speck of dust you raise is somebody's world out there exploding. Look!" I pushed down his visor; he froze at once.

"It's all mixed up, Topsy," he said. "The lizards and the stars and the lava and the fish and all the moons—Are they moons, Topsy, pocking up with holes?—they're getting me dizzy."

"We've got to make a run for it," I said, "before it gets any worse." Sequences inside the timeship were starting to be blown awry. My mind was squinting to see things in order. In representing them now, I'm just writing them out in the logical, causal order, with question preceding answer, and consequence following act, but the lived reality was quite different. It was only after I had helped Elly to his feet that I made the effort to do so, for example, and the entire sequence was repeated four times at the same o'clock.

Think of a child's puzzle: a drawing divided into vertical bars. The drawing comprises two pictures spliced together in alternating bars. By covering every other bar, you can see one picture or the other. Multiply that a hundredfold and translate it into three dimensions in real time, and you have our fractured timeship world, riddled by eddies of time swirling together with multi-headed HHC's, winking random moments out of existence.

"Come on!" I said. I took Elly's hand. "Let's go!"

I walked along the Susquehanna, thinking how nice it would be at the bottom, dead. When the big blackout hit New York, I thought it was me. Then came the news of a mechanical failure at the generating plant in Niagara Falls.

I had a headache like a mine cave-in. Phantasms and fireballs burned the sky all over Broome County. Again I was deafened as if by an avalanche, and I couldn't shake the smell of rock dust—lime and sulfur.

It was a spray of pulverized limestone and pebbles dislodged from a shelf just above us. Elly and I had gained the base of the cliff, and bits of rock rained down on us. The base curved up slowly for about a hundred fifty feet, from the collapse of our protogalaxy—resulting in the formation of the stars of the Milky Way—back to the final decoupling of matter and energy, less than half a billion years after the Big Bang, at redshift of ten thousand. (The present value was four!)

My brains felt like cold pabulum. I sensed that I was sitting up in a chair, but my mind was telling me that I was horizontal. I could see the dark man talking, but my mind told me that my eyes were closed. I knew that my mom and dad were coming to visit me any time now, and I wanted to get this over with, even if it wasn't happening.

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"I'm going to ask you a question, and I don't want you to get excited or angry. I want you to sit still and to think about what I'm going to ask you." So said the dark man. He leaned forward. I knew that if I gave the wrong answer and he told my parents about it, it would break their hearts. "If the New York power outage was caused, as you say, by a rock slide in a timeship billions of years ago, then what do you make of the mechanical failure at the generating plant in Niagara Falls? Was that just some kind of coincidence?"

I said, "Give me a cigarette."

"They're bad for you, Siggy," he said.

I said, "I know it." He handed me a cigarette from the box he kept in the wide drawer of his metal desk, and he lit it for me. I took a deep drag, and as I blew out the smoke in a big, blue billow, I said, "Causal recovery."

"What's that?"

"Causal recovery," I said, watching my smoke swallow his shaggy head. When he left the hospital and went home to wifey and kiddies, he'd still have my smoke in his whiskers. "That's how it always works. It has to do with the way the human mind is made. But it's not *just* the human mind. After all, the human mind is a reflection of the laws and the forms it evolved *from*. *All* reality conspires together with the human mind to bring about causal recovery. . . . You're getting impatient with me."

"Not at all. I'm waiting to hear you explain to me what 'causal recovery' *is*."

"There is a disruption of the causal order of things. It's not really a disruption; there is never *really* a disruption. But the distance between the world of the cause and the world of the effect is so vast in space or time, or in conception, that it *seems* a perfect disruption. However, in causality as in pneumatics, Nature abhors a vacuum. So there comes into being, *apparently*, a new cause, local to the effect, not one many billions of years ago, or in another world, or in another Mind, but one right *here*, right next to the perceived effect: a Niagara Falls."

"But nobody made up the failure at Niagara Falls. It really happened, Siggy. Do you doubt that?"

"No," I said. I had to stop for a moment. I had to look at my fingertips. They were so yellow! I had not realized how stained they had become from the nicotine. I don't think they were that bad before I entered the state hospital. "Niagara Falls happened, all right. Only, that wasn't what caused the power outage. Both the power outage *and* the plant breakdown had the same cause."

"So that we'd have to interrupt your electrotherapy and complete it the next day?"

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"No, goddamnit, I'm not a madman! I don't think the world revolves around *me*. That *was* just an accident. I'm talking about timeships. I'm talking about the evolution of the goddamn universe!"

"Take it easy. You don't see your explanation as a little far-fetched? You don't believe in Occam's Razor?"

"Occam? The simplest explanation is the true one? That what you mean?"

"Yes."

"Doctor, if we really believed in Occam's Razor, we'd all be goddamn solipsists. Please . . . "

"What is it, Siggy?"

"Please don't tell my mother and father that I said any of this."

"We'll see."

The smoke eddied and swelled, sunlit, through the doctor's room, filling it like a cloud of exhaust. It *was* a cloud of exhaust. It was the exhaust of Duba's executive time shuttle retroing forward, mission accomplished, to the time of his completed deal with Bull Interplanetary. It was real pretty—that's what I thought. I like it when there's pretty smoke, if it doesn't make you cough and stuff.

"You bastard!" When I heard Topsy say that, I felt bad, even though rocks was falling on us and before and after was getting mixed around and there was for sure plenty of other stuff I ought to be paying attention to if I knew what's good for me, because I'm not stupid, you know. But I thought she meant me. But she didn't. She meant Mr. Duba. She was looking up at a hole in the sky, and said it again and again: "You bastard! You bastard!" Then she says it backward: "Dratsab uoy! Dratsab uoy! Dratsab uoy!" like the sound was being pumped back into her, what come out before.

She sat down. "Don't sit there, Tops," I tell her, "because there is rocks falling on us."

She says: "You are a dear little man, Elly, but I'm winded. I just feel winded. That wasn't Bull attacking just now. This time it was Duba. See that smoke trail? That's *his* shuttle, for sure, hypodyning the hell out of here now that it's ruined us. Whatever he was using us for, it's finished now. He's just going to dump us."

And she folded in just like an empty sack. She looked like she used to back in my apt when she would lay there inside a shadow, when she would listen to the static between the stations and think about home.

"Cheer up, old Tops," I say. "We gotta get you to home. Don't be so low, because we gotta climb up to the *ylem* now, girl. Then you'll be okay." I sat down next to her then, because my neck hurt and my arms was feeling numb. She laid her big, black hand on my head and smiled

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while there was lights like fishes and fires all in the sky, swarming into heaps way up behind my Topsy. She looked like an angel to me, boy!

"I just feel so lonely, Elly. I'm sorry. Tell me—Is there really such a thing as Mr. Duba?"

"Sure there is, Tops," I said.

"And we're in a timeship, right? That isn't just some time-anomalous sense-image stuck in my mind?"

"Sure, Topsy," I said.

"And we can get to *ylem*. We can climb up there. That's the idea, right? That isn't just in my time-orphaned brain?"

"That's the idea, Topsy."

"And Siggy is with us?"

I said, "Yeah, sure, Tops," on account of how I didn't want her to feel funny, but I sure didn't follow her on that particular one.

"*Siggy* is with us?" Siggy said. "She said, 'Siggy is with us?' " He laughed and threw some underwear down onto my head from the balcony of the A-frame. "You crazy jerk, Eliot," he laughed. "I'm sure glad I don't have *your* dreams."

"Listen," I said. "It gets better. Then this ash woman, the one that's all black, Topsy, starts to climb up the cliff. She takes one, two steps, and—Whammo!—she's climbing hand over hand past galaxies uncluster-ing, unforming, backward in time, like strings of spittle stretched to mist. Are you listening, Siggy?"

"I'm listening," he shouted from his bedroom, upstairs. "Do you mind if I put on some music?"

"Yes. Then she hits the vertical, at about nineteen and a half billion years back, redshift close to ten thousand by the Doppler gauge."

"Doppler gauge! You're a nutcase, you know that?"

"There's more," I say. Siggy puts on a record . . .

Is that boy . . .

"Come on, can it, Sig! I said, there's *more.*"

. . . SCREEE!

"Thank you," I said. "It's redshift ten thousand by Topsy's Doppler. Every inch of ascent is about twenty million years back in time. Elly . . . "

"Eliot?"

"No, *Elly!* Not *me!* Elly is back a few feet, say, three quarters of a billion years or so closer to now. There are still galaxies forming around him where he is. The air is thick with HHC's from Duba's cannon, viscous with time currents and whirlpools of inverse time. Even with his visor up, Elly sees galaxies and ferns and positrons kaleidoscoping through his field of vision. He's not very smart except at column addition and chess; he doesn't know where to find a foothold. Topsy is talking him through it."

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And Siggy said, "Here they come now."

"Huh?"

"Look out the window, champ."

So I looked. From our big picture windows you could look down the mountain and north over Broome County all the way to the airfield. Scrambling up the final cliff, grabbing onto vines and scrub growth for leverage, a jet-black woman in a khaki jumpsuit was leading a man who looked much too much like me.

It was a clean rise, thin as they come, with slight ripples and few visible scoops for a hand or foot to grip. The prominent weakness was a line of cracks zigzagging up out of sight, the hypostatic image of a causal ravine dating back to the Planck Epoch, bare inches from the summit. The sides of the cracks corresponded to causally disjunct parts of the primordial mass; the distance between them was greater than light could travel before they separated even more. Perhaps one could jam one's knuckles or even just the shanks of one's fingers into the line, to pull up, hand over hand, through the earliest millennia. Perhaps not.

There was no shortcut here; that's not how the timeship worked. " . . . you have to *mix* yourself with it, Siggy," I said. "You have to struggle in the landscape of the hypostat, become one with it. That's the only way to stay inside the timeship. Otherwise you blow out the hull to God knows where, synchronous to nothing in this world and nothing in the next."

But there was no "Siggy." That was just another cul de sac in my chrono-anomalous nerve circuits, my mind like crystals of iodine, brown dust from a brown vapor, sublimed by a random puff of time. There was only me with dear Elly, the half-dead half-wit clinging to my black calf, and the defiled timeship, bleeding eons into empty space-time while we muscled our way toward *ylem*.

I tried flattening out the cliff by fiddling with the Doppler, rescaling, reducing the apparent Hubble slope, but that would increase our travel distance. With the timeship crumbling about us—while Duba's hit men trundled home to their bonuses—we could only rush up the vertical and hope to make *ylem* before the leak killed us, well, me; Elly had a different death in store.

I hazarded a peek at my Doppler—close to ten to the fifth; now came trouble. Just above me, the seam was so narrow I could only lock one pinky in it and torque up maybe a hundred fifty million years, which looked like eight inches. I called down to Elly to do the same. His head was starting to loll from the poison in Bull's dart. "Suck your chest into the wall! Stay vertical," I warned him. Down where he was—galaxies

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dissolving backward in time—there was still a slight rib on which to get a foothold.

I heard pebbles sliding below. Elly's fingers had slipped against a chockstone wedged inside the crack. It was a Bok globule, a cold, dark cloud about to collapse into protostars. He slid down more than a billion years and was flailing and yelling among crowds of infant galaxies. Suddenly he sat quite still.

I called to him: "Are you okay, Elly?"

"It's so pretty!" he said. "It's like big ghosts, Topsy! Look at them. See there how they're lacing their fingers together? One's got a ring on it."

"Push your visor up," I said, but his visor *was* up.

"It's all shining, Topsy. Gee, it's pretty. Big necklaces and diamonds is eating littler ones. You go home. I'm gonna stay and watch, honey."

"What?" I shouted.

"Honey!"

I held Sunshine's girl tight and tried to ignore the Muthuhs snoring and fidgeting on the floor. We beat against each other like a jellyfish pulsing, but I wasn't getting anywhere. She was too sleepy. I was too weak. I began to feel that we were a figment of the imagination of those sleeping gypsies, and in a way, I guess, we were. They were listening behind closed eyes, storing our sounds for their erotic fantasies. In the next room that record was skipping over and over:

> *"Is that boy still climbing up the mountain?*
> *Has he faltered, or has he fallen down SCREEE!*
> *Is that boy . . . "*

And we humped and we humped. Somehow, I couldn't get proper traction. We must have gone on like that for a couple of hours; I just wouldn't give up. Can you believe it? And then my head hurt. It hurt something awful. And everything was so bright, it hurt my eyes. The air, it felt like hot lead all over me. There was barbells exploding in the sky and smoke rings and fiery things like slingshot stones. No, you go on home, Topsy. Follow your static, honey, right back home. I gotta take a snooze.

"What's wrong?"

I opened my eyes and said, "Elly's dead."

The doctor said, "That's what you're seeing? That's what you're experiencing right now?"

"Yes," I said. "Elly's dead. Bull's poison killed him. He didn't make it."

"Who is Bull?" the doctor asked.

"He's in with Duba now. They were fighting at first, but now they're in cahoots. Elly and Topsy were just cannon fodder. The big shots walk

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away from it with their pockets bulging and their arms around each other's back."

"Do you want to use my handkerchief?"

"No."

"You're mad at them, aren't you?"

"No. It's just the way the world is, I guess."

"Tell me something," the doctor said. "Do you feel like it's your fault that Siggy ended up the way he did?"

"Of course I do," I said. "I was with him the whole time."

"Is that why you tried to kill yourself? Is that why you ended up here as well?"

"Maybe. But there's something else."

"What's that, Eliot?"

"Elly, Doctor—he's dead. And I don't know if Topsy's going to make it."

It was not a skipping record that played that song over and over as I sweated on top of Sunshine's girl. The record player was another instance of *causal recovery*. A bullet from Bull's dirigibles had struck a certain mound of salt inside the timeship. The salt had exploded into the air and was caught up by one of Duba's HHC's.

Of this salt, one crystal was actually the hypostatic image of an event which had not yet unfolded at the time of Bull's attack: Duba sitting in his office at the headquarters of Duba Enterprises, Inc., in a mammoth building that used to be a mountain near the Pennsylvania border, just outside of Binghamton; Duba blowing smoke rings from his fat cigar and humming to himself absent-mindedly; he is thinking about Elly's demise, a slight debit to his massive profit from the helium deal. Duba, his mind sugary, fat and lazy with wealth, sings to himself in a breathy voice:

"Is that boy still climbing up the mountain?
Has he faltered, or has he fallen down . . . ?"

That's what the salt crystal was—a voice, a song, a disjointed reverie. It swirled against Hubble time, became pocked, duplicated, altered, melted into other o'clocks and other venues, one of them a crowded room in Santa Fe, New Mexico, twenty billion years past *ylem,* where two weary primates made the beast with two backs.

My arm was pumped to the limit. I jammed the other hand into the fissure, pulled out my right and let it dangle for a minute, shaking blood back into it. This was the part I had been dreading: redshift above ten to the fourth, a week or so from the Big Bang itself, twenty billion years

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into what I used to think of as the remote past. The hypostats built into the timeship—the life of the cosmos as landscape—were competing with volleys of images and sensations swirling in through the leak in the hull. I wasn't supposed to feel the terrific density and temperature I was passing through; they were supposed to be land features I could deal with in a dispassionate way.

I leaned into the hot rock face, frictioning my foot against a wrinkle in the stone, hoping my toes wouldn't butter down off their hold. I lunged upward. Hovering at the dead point of my maneuver for what must have been millennia on the referent time scale—I threw my right fist back into the crack and gained purchase at redshift ten to the ninth, one minute from the Big Bang.

Then I glimpsed my poppa's tattoo. Straining till I saw blood, I chinned up to my highest hold and saw The Seventh Bull, the size of my face, chiseled into the rock. It was Bull Interplanetary's "Kilroy was here." This was the spot where Bull's operative had managed to alter the primal nucleosynthetic process, to change the percentage of helium produced, creating me, *inter alia*, as a byproduct.

The Seventh Bull was a picture I knew—or thought I knew—from the series of ten Bulls in Buddhist lore:

The Bull is sought. The Bull is tracked.
The Bull is glimpsed. The Bull is caught.
The Bull is tamed. The Bull is ridden. . . .
And seventh—*The Bull is passed!*

I reached into my pocket, next to the Doppler gauge, and fished out Duba's black ball. I knew what it was now—a dud. I threw it down the cliff and watched it disappear into the blinding clouds of the protosolar nebula. Then, with nothing more than a prayer holding me to the headwall, I reached up to grab the overhang separating me from the summit. It was like biting a high power line. I mantled over the edge on bent arms, pumping to the limit, till my stomach was scraping against the summit.

I had reached Planck's Epoch, redshift nearly a dectillion, temperature of ten million billion trillion electron volts, density 1,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 kilograms per cubic centimeter, but then the whole observable universe was only a billionth of a trillionth of a trillionth of a centimeter across. I was deaf, blind, completely numb to sensations of any kind . . .

I vaulted onto the summit and into the Eighth Bull: Oneself Passed! And I realized—I was numb to the world because I *was* the world. I had

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passed inside my own Compton wave length, into the absolute freedom of the infinitesimal, Heisenberg's sanctum, the undefilable mystery in the womb of the world, redshift going to infinity, data to zero—or whatever I would make it, I, Topsy the *Primum Mobile!*

That was twenty billion years ago. Topsy has achieved her goal: to have never been born—As my grandfather used to say, "And who is that lucky? Maybe one in a million!" But there are two more Bulls:

Ninth: Home (ylem) *is passed.*
Tenth: And life goes on. . . .

I'm sitting by the window on Sonoma Mountain, writing these disjointed notes as the sky starts to glow with radiation from our five-billion-year-old progenitor. The sun is hazy, the mountains dark green. My head still hurts like hell. The ice packs are limp rags staining the corners of my notebook with their leakage. No dirigibles remain.

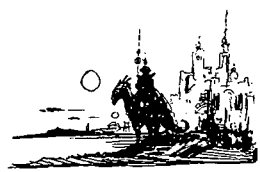
Siggy has the most disagreeable snore on human record, if it's not just my migraine. This is the Ninth Bull: I'm one little person again, star ash, denouement. I'm Eliot, just like it says on the byline of this story. And the Tenth Bull is that in about five minutes I'm going to have to wake Siggy up so he can get to his appointment in San Rafael on time.

I'm all for causal recovery. God bless causal recovery! God bless wives or husbands and children in wallet photos; dull, local explanations for dull local events; even migraine headaches, if you like, to wedge a spanner twixt this God-blessed world and the goddamned inexplicable others.

When I was leaving El Centro in Santa Fe, Sunshine collared me. He wasn't mad that I had been banging his girlfriend. He even liked me. "Don't go home, man," Sunshine told me. "Don't be like everybody. Stay here with us. Be a hippy."

But I didn't take Sunshine's advice. After all, what *is* this life, deep as the night sky, mysteriously rich, each moment, each creature immeasurably ancient? A speck of dust touches my brow. It is Duba's black ball tumbling from the peak of time, where Topsy let it go. The radio spits static. It is a quiver of the primeval fireball.

It's quite remarkable enough being like everybody. ●



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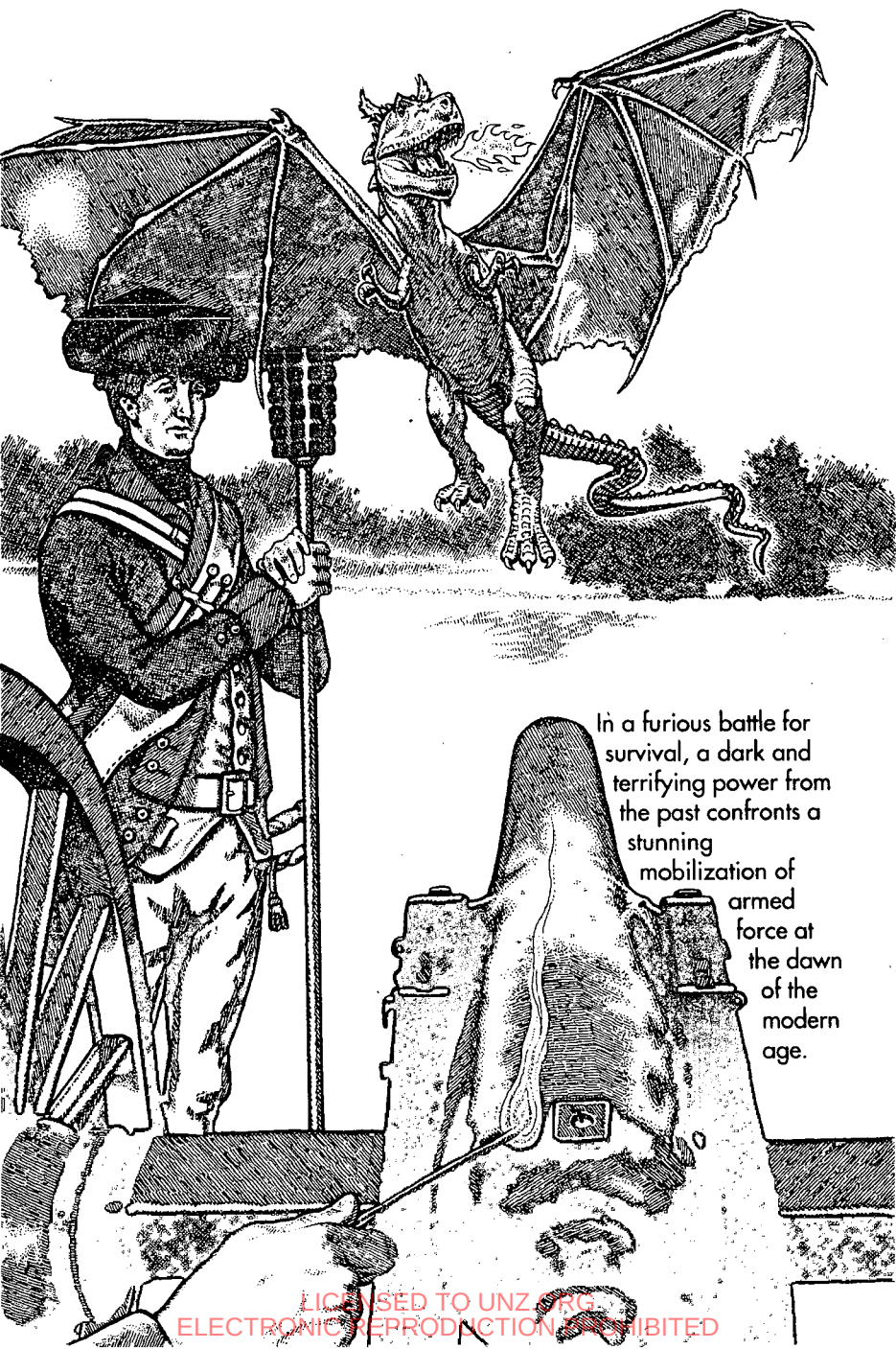
In a furious battle for survival, a dark and terrifying power from the past confronts a stunning mobilization of armed force at the dawn of the modern age.

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Tom Purdom

DRAGON DRILL

Illustration by Ron Chironna

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Ecrasez l'infame, the king had said with a smile. *Crush the infamous thing.*

Fritz had been echoing Voltaire's famous outcry against the Roman church, of course. But he had obviously chosen the phrase because he thought its associations were appropriate. A dragon was the embodiment of superstition—a creature from the world of dreams, snorting and rampaging in a time when the disputes of philosophers were argued with wit and mathematics, and the disputes of kings were settled by disciplined masses equipped with muskets and artillery.

It had been, in almost every respect, a typical visit to the court of the most enlightened monarch of the age. The king's blue uniform had been untidy, as always. His hands and the lace on the cuffs of his shirt sleeves had been grimy and inkstained. The grenadiers in the halls had hopped to attention with all their customary smartness. General von Wogenfer had even attended the afternoon concert and listened with some pleasure as Fritz and the court musicians worked their way through one of Quantz's flute concertos. (He was impressed, once again, with Quantz's ability to write a showy, emotional flute part without taxing Frederick's abilities. When all else failed, an ingenious bit of orchestral accompaniment could make the flute solo sound more exciting than it really was.) The king had exchanged bows and French epigrams with a pair of visiting literati. For every minute of the entire morning and afternoon, General von Wogenfer had been surrounded by all the realities that proved he was still immersed in the day to day life of the modern world.

And somewhere in Silesia, a creature out of fairy tales—a huge, fire-breathing flying monster, just like the dragons in the legends—was threatening to desolate an entire province if it wasn't offered a genuine Hapsburg princess as a sacrifice.

"It is absurd that such a creature should influence the destiny of a modern state," Fritz said, shaping his French with great care, as if he thought his sentences were being written down. "I have spent most of my reign fighting for Silesia. Am I to lose it because of a superstition? Because of a fantasy from an imaginary world in which single warriors righted wrongs with the strokes of magic swords?"

Von Wogenfer had sat in the king's private study, with his long legs stretched in front of him, and hidden his feelings behind pinches of snuff. Von Wogenfer was a Junker—with a pedigree that would have cowed a French *duc*—but he was, like King Frederick himself, a gentleman who belonged, mind and heart, to the great society that was bestowing enlightenment and reason on all Europe. He could calculate the trajectory of an artillery shell, play the harpsichord and the violin with genuine taste, discuss Tacitus and Plutarch like a scholar, and captivate the most demanding of French ladies with sallies delivered in their own language.

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His coats hung on his tall frame with an elegance that had sometimes misled young officers, who had mistakenly assumed he owed his military prominence to the king's amorous proclivities. Was he supposed to suddenly believe Newton and Voltaire had never existed, and the fantasies of the priests were, after all, an accurate description of the world?

"I have made some attempt to inspect the records," Frederick said. "In 1719, a Hapsburg princess did apparently die for reasons that seem to have been deliberately obscured—as if she had committed one of the traditional indiscretions. The officer who arrested Costanze Adelaide when she tried to slip across the border insists that she relates her story with the utmost calm. The reports I've received from eyewitnesses in the area include verifications from people who know I would have them hanged if they deceived me in such a matter."

The first twenty-three years of Frederick's reign had been, for all practical purposes, a struggle for Silesia. In 1740, his soldiers had crossed a border for the first time and seized the province from the young heir to the Hapsburg domains, Maria Theresa. Between 1740 and 1747, he had fought two wars in defense of his conquest. Between 1756 and 1763, he had fought for it again, in a grinding seven year struggle that had nearly destroyed his house. And all the while, the Hapsburgs had known that this thing came out of the east once every fifty years. Three times in their history a member of their family had saved the province from destruction. Before that, the firebreather had been appeased with the daughters of the local princes and barons.

Frederick flicked his sleeve at the third man in the room—the plump boy-in-an-officer's-uniform he had introduced as Dietrich Jacob Alsten. "Monsieur Alsten has prepared a memorandum on the characteristics of these creatures, based on the reports that have survived as legends. I am preparing a carriage equipped with sleeping accommodations. You will leave tonight—after we've shared some refreshment and entertainment. Your detachment will consist of two battalions of infantry, one battalion of grenadiers, several squadrons of hussars and cuirassiers, and whatever artillery we can muster."

The King's sleeve flicked again. "I think you can understand the difficulties we will face if the people of our new province feel they have been rescued by a Hapsburg who offered herself as a sacrifice. You must show them that Prussian discipline—and Prussian firepower—are a better defense than the skirts of a Hapsburg princess."

They had been camping on the little hill for two days when the lone hussar rode toward them with his sword raised above his head—the agreed-upon signal that the "Polish animal" was drawing near. The major who had the watch shouted the first orders. Drums took up the

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beat. Infantry trotted to their rows of neatly stacked muskets and began assembling in formation.

Von Wogenfer descended from his carriage at a deliberate, calculated pace. On his left, Princess Costanze Adelaide had already been standing by her own carriage. Two grenadiers grabbed her shoulders as he turned their way. The captain who was in charge of her guard snapped an order and the grenadiers hustled her toward the stake planted halfway down the slope. A bayonet had been lashed to the top of the stake. Just below the bayonet, a small regimental flag quivered in the early summer breeze.

Costanze Adelaide was a small, pleasantly round woman in her late twenties. The two grenadiers were men who had been chosen for their size and fighting ability—like all the soldiers in the grenadier battalions. Their tall, pointed hats deliberately magnified the effect of their stature. The princess looked like a child between them.

Von Wogenfer lifted his hat and bowed to her back. "Good luck, mademoiselle. My apologies."

The princess halted her guards with a toss of her hands that proved she was, without doubt, a Hapsburg. "I shall pray for your soul, general."

Her voice was soft and unusually melodious, but he had learned she could be a formidable opponent in debate. The king would have noted the long hours she spent in churches and dismissed her as a religious fanatic. Von Wogenfer had discovered she was a theologian who had absorbed the most sophisticated instruction the Roman priests could offer. The logic that guided her behavior had been as lucid as a mathematical proof.

He bowed again. "And I shall do my best to keep you alive, your highness."

She stared at him for a long moment. "If that is your primary concern, general, you can save yourself—and your sovereign—a great deal of trouble."

His horse appeared at von Wogenfer's side. His body servant handed him a clean pair of white gloves and he systematically inspected both sides of each glove—as he always did—before he slipped them over his hands. He didn't place his boot in the stirrup until he was certain every soldier within thirty paces had seen him run his eyes over every detail of the saddle and the leopard skin saddle cloth.

The troops had fallen in and started tramping to their positions. Snare drums were tapping the cadence. The standards of the regiments and the halberds of the sergeants swayed above the bayonets of the common soldiers. As Frederick had promised, von Wogenfer had been given two battalions of line infantry and one battalion of grenadiers—two thousand foot soldiers altogether.

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The two line battalions belonged to a regiment that "faced" its blue Prussian coats with yellow. Their cuffs, their lapels, and the turnbacks on their coat-tails had been dyed with the sunniest yellow the cloth factories could produce. Their hats were the standard three-cornered affairs that topped the heads of the line infantry fielded by every modern army. The grenadiers were dressed in the same blue coats and white waistcoats, but their uniforms were faced with green. The ornate insignias on the front of their hats glittered and flashed as they marched.

Von Wogenfer had drilled the entire detachment relentlessly throughout the last two days. By now it took them less than two minutes to arrange themselves in the battle formation he had chosen.

The stake had been planted in a small hollow his sappers had dug in the hillside. Only the upper half of Costanze Adelaide's body rose above ground level. She arranged herself so she was facing down the hill and Captain Kreutzen accepted a length of rope from a sapper.

A grenadier company marched down the hill as soon as Kreutzen signaled the princess's hands were securely tied. The company flowed around Costanze Adelaide and halted when it was placed so the stake was positioned in the exact middle of the formation. Von Wogenfer could still see the bayonet and the flag, but the princess herself was lost in the forest formed by the shoulders, hats, and muskets of two hundred elite troops.

The grenadier company was the heart of the formation he had worked out with young Alsten, who had acted as his counselor and admiring audience. They were his final defense against the special threat that had preoccupied him from the moment Frederick had dumped this affair on his shoulders. They would be surrounded by the two battalions of line infantry, who would form a protective square around the grenadier company—as if the line infantry were executing the standard defense against ordinary cavalry.

The entire plan had been diagrammed in pencil on a piece of paper he had stuffed into his left coat pocket. On the diagram, von Wogenfer's own position was marked with a cross near the top of the slope, about seventy-five paces from the square. His cavalry squadrons were supposed to form up on both sides of his position. Directly in front of him, a second company of grenadiers would be posted where he could employ it as a reserve.

Now the mortal, all-too-vulnerable human bodies represented on the sketch were moving into position. The second company of grenadiers was parading into the open ground in front of him. The breastplates of the cuirassiers gleamed in the sun when he glanced to his right.

On his left, the officers of the hussar squadrons lounged in their saddles with the studied insouciance cultivated by light cavalry. Hussars wore

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one of the most dashing uniforms the military imagination had conceived and these particular specimens belonged to a regiment that adorned itself with one of the more spectacular examples. Crimson plumes rose from their fur caps. Gold frogging and white fur garnished their sky blue jackets.

The commander of the grenadier battalion, Lt. Colonel Basel-Derhof, was riding beside the second grenadier company. His eyes were flicking over every detail of the company's uniforms and deportment. They came to a halt with the snap and precision that were supposed to be one of the distinctive marks of grenadiers and von Wogenfer nodded his approval.

At the bottom of the slope, a stream ran along the edge of a typical stretch of prosperous Silesian farmland. It was a clear, beautifully sunny day—a morning when bayonets flashed like mirrors.

A horseman fell in on von Wogenfer's left. Von Wogenfer turned his head and his youthful adviser offered him a curt nod.

Von Wogenfer smiled. By nature, young Alsten seemed to be brash—even bubbly. There had been times during the last few days when he had babbled for an hour straight. Then he would suddenly decide he should be more soldierly and his garrulousness would be replaced by a caricature of military brusqueness.

It was easy to understand why the boy had come to Frederick's attention. Forty years ago, young Frederick had been a flute playing intellectual who was destined to be the leader of an aristocracy that had only one purpose in life: the preservation of a state which possessed no natural defensive boundaries. His father's brutal attempts to transform Fritz into a soldier had become one of the great scandals of the European courts. When he had tried to escape his father's torments at the age of eighteen, the prince had been imprisoned for a year and forced to watch when his best friend was beheaded.

Alsten was clearly a scholar by nature. He gushed with enthusiasm when he described the wonders he had discovered in libraries and the specimens he had carried home from his sojourns in the mountains. He had been planted, however, in a family in which duty and discipline were the only virtues the father could understand.

"Well, my young friend," von Wogenfer said, "soon you, too, will have a few tales of death and daring you can parade in front of the recruits."

Alsten smiled stiffly. Von Wogenfer noted the flicker of anxiety in his eyes and pointed at the pencil case and writing board the young man had arranged across his saddle horn.

"Make sure you get it all down," von Wogenfer said. "Be ready to give me your best advice the moment I ask for it."

He turned his head to the right, to inspect the cannon he had placed

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on that flank, and wondered if Alsten would someday realize his commander's brusqueness had been meant as a kindness. The first time von Wogenfer had advanced with his regiment, he had nearly been overwhelmed by fear and confusion. The only thing that had kept him moving was the knowledge he had a specific task. He was there to oversee his platoon, the forty men marching in front of him. If they marched and fired and arrived at their goal, then he had done all anyone asked of him.

As usual, the roads had delayed the equipment he needed the most. His artillery consisted of exactly three pieces—two six-pounders and a single horse-drawn gun. He had deployed one six-pounder at each end of the cavalry line, so the two gun crews could cover every spot on the hillside. The horse gun had been posted near his own place in the line, where he could transmit his orders to its officer, Captain Hoff, without dispatching a messenger.

The crews of the two six-pounders had lit their portfires—the slow-burning fuses, attached to long rods, that the gunners would apply to their touch holes when they received the order to fire. Behind each six-pounder, about ten steps behind the trail of the gun carriage, a full company of grenadiers had fallen into formation. Both companies snapped to attention when their captains realized their general was looking them over.

Three young lieutenants were sitting their horses behind him, ready to act as couriers. He gave them a polite, carefully measured nod and they straightened up and did their best to look businesslike.

Alsten coughed discreetly. A stir passed through the ranks. Von Wogenfer looked to the front, knowing what the stir must mean, and saw the thing for the first time.

For a moment, it looked like a large bird that happened to be holding some kind of wiggling, still-living prey suspended from its claws. Then he noted its relationship to the horizon and realized how far away it really was. The shape it appeared to be carrying was its own body, hanging from slowly flapping wings.

He murmured a command and the sergeant standing beside his horse handed him his telescope. By the time the tube had been extended and focused, the creature was so close he had to run the glass along its sides as if he was studying the walls of a fortress.

Sunlight bounced off scales that looked as if they could have been employed as cuirasses. He moved the instrument to the left and the center of an immense red eye filled the field.

He lowered the telescope and watched it approach. In the formation massed around the stake, sergeants were already ordering their men to stand fast. A young grenadier lieutenant looked back at him and he

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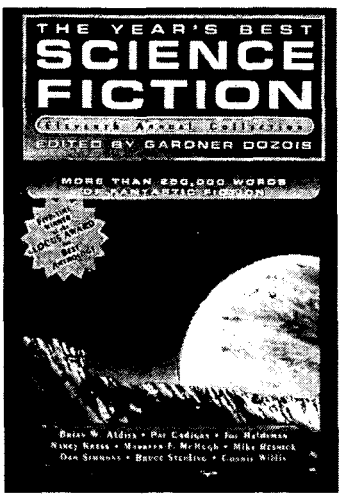

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automatically gave the poor fool a frown that returned him to his proper interests.

A shadow swept across the hill. Horses neighed. Voices barked commands. Von Wogenfer passed the telescope to his sergeant and steadied his horse with both hands.

The thing let out a strange, quavering shriek. It turned in a great arc and von Wogenfer felt the first chill of superstitious fear spread through his body.

How could a thing like that fly? Its body was slender and snakelike but it would have filled the inside of most of the larger churches he had visited in his travels. No one had yet unraveled the secrets of the mechanism that held birds aloft, but it was obvious there was no relationship between the size of the creature's wings and the mass of its anatomy.

He was still living, after all, in a world in which every physical object was ruled by the majestic beauty of Newton's mathematics. The Earth was pulling on that long, writhing body with the same force it exerted on every creature that lived on its surface. If those wings could keep that mass aloft, then clearly he was looking at something that was not subject to natural law. . . .

To Costanze Adelaide, he was engaging in an act of blasphemy. *If this creature is truly evil,* she had argued, *if it really is a manifestation of some ancient and ungodly Presence—then it is supposed to be confronted with the power of virtue and unselfish sacrifice. If a thing like this exists, it must have been been spawned in some realm beyond the rule of Reason. How can you defeat it with weapons based on the laws of Reason?*

The dragon settled onto the hill about a hundred paces in front of his troops. It pointed its head at the sky—it could have looked down on every building in Berlin—and a massive red flare rose toward the clouds.

Sergeants repeated the order to stand fast. Two officers pointed their pistols at the backs of soldiers who had indicated they might be responding to the thing's presence with normal human emotions.

The dragon lowered its head. It focused its huge eyes on the men massed in front of it and von Wogenfer wondered if it was assessing the situation or merely pausing before its instincts told it what it should do next. By now a mob of peasants and merchants would have reacted to its displays by turning their backs and scattering like a flock of sparrows. Instead, it was faced with the same stolid ranks that had stymied the armies of Austria, Russia, and France—the armies of the Three Harpies, as the king had dubbed Maria Theresa, the Czarina Elizabeth, and Louis XV's meddling mistress, Madame de Pompadour. Was this the first time it had faced disciplined infantry?

The flare had been approximately a hundred paces long and eight

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paces wide. The creature would probably have to come within seventy-five paces of the line if it wanted to achieve the maximum effect. . . .

He realized his brain was working again and turned to the cannon on his left. The officer was watching him expectantly.

Von Wogenfer lifted his hand and gave the artillery officer a wave that was as casual and offhand as he could make it. If there was one dictum Fritz liked to repeat to the point of boredom, it was the idea that the common soldier should fear his officers more than he feared the enemy. The soldier stood his ground because he knew his lieutenant was standing behind him. The lieutenant stood because he knew his captain and his colonel were standing behind him. And over it all, keeping them all in their places, loomed the gallant, lighthearted, heroically unruffled figure of the General—who stayed where he was because the king would have him hanged if he didn't.

Screams jerked von Wogenfer's attention back to the front of the formation. The animal had lurched forward and released another flare. Half a dozen blackened bodies were crumpling to the ground. A soldier was falling out of line with his clothes flaming around him. The guttural orders of the sergeants were rising once again. The soldiers on the right and left of the charred bodies were already repeating the terrible ritual that was the infantry's traditional response to artillery fire. Knees high, feet stamping, eyes fixed on their front, they were sidestepping to close the gap.

The gun on the left crashed. The artillery sergeant chanted the first orders of the reloading drill and the rammer shoved his sponge into the barrel. Their officer eyed the fall of the shot.

The dragon turned its head toward the source of smoke and noise. Von Wogenfer pulled out his pocket watch and noted the position of the second hand. Twenty-five seconds after the first shot, the gun thundered for the second time. The artillery captain had taken a few extra seconds and adjusted his aim.

The animal sank into a crouch. Its wings rose above its spine. It leaped, screaming, and hurled itself at the gun.

More German commands rang out. The platoons directly under the dragon's path dropped to one knee with their musket butts braced against the ground and the muzzles pointed at the sky. Their faces stared straight ahead, as if they were standing at attention on the parade ground. Officers barked the command to fire as the dragon passed over their platoons.

Hundreds of muskets cracked. The dragon screamed and veered away from the formation. It banked like a big, awkward bird and settled to earth a few steps from the position it had just left.

Von Wogenfer signaled to the cannon on his right. Both guns fired simultaneously. A long red line appeared on the dragon's side, just in

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front of its right wing—the mark of a cannon ball that had raked it like an invisible file.

"It's hit!" Alsten blurted. "We can hurt it! It turned away from the musket fire, too. The musket balls may not penetrate its armor but they must sting! If they can't kill it—at least they can keep it away. It's even possible they can herd it! If they could drive it . . . like cows. . . ."

Von Wogenfer waved him to silence. The infantry who had dropped to one knee had already stood up and completed their reloading drill.

The whole concept of attack from the air had given him the feeling he had stepped into a world in which nothing he knew could help him. You could arrange your forces in solid ranks, with every approach blocked by masses of disciplined infantry—and your enemy could still descend on you, like the sun or the rain, in spite of all your preparations.

Some of the men had looked puzzled when he had made them spend hours dropping to the ground and firing into the air. Now they understood.

An infantry battalion was a maneuverable concentration of fire power. Its tactics were determined by the limitations of its basic weapon—the smoothbore, muzzle loading musket. There were soldiers in the world who were trained to use rifled weapons, but they were specialists, and it took them a minute to load and fire each shot. Prussian troops could load and fire three times a minute in the face of the enemy. There was, however, no guarantee that any particular shot would actually hit something. Musket balls could be loaded with such efficiency because they were a hair smaller than the musket barrel. They jiggled ever so slightly as they were propelled toward the muzzle. Air resistance added other inaccuracies. One hundred paces was considered an extreme range. If two battalions exchanged volleys at fifty paces, most of the soldiers in both units would still be standing when the smoke cleared.

Soldiers fought in massed ranks partly because it was an efficient way to move them around the battlefield and partly because it was their primary defense against cavalry. If you tried to oppose horsemen with firearms, your initial volley would topple a few riders—but the rest would smash into the line while the infantry were still reloading. Only the bayonet could frustrate a charge. Horses halted as soon as they found themselves faced with a hedge of bayonets. But it had to be a hedge—an unbroken line formed by men standing shoulder to shoulder, two and three ranks deep. If you cut even the smallest hole in that line, if anyone wavered or ran, a few horsemen would slip through, swords would hack at the line from the rear, more cavalry would pour through, the formation would disintegrate, and the impregnable human wall would be transformed into a field of isolated foot soldiers futilely thrusting their bayonets at mounted furies who rode at them from every direction.

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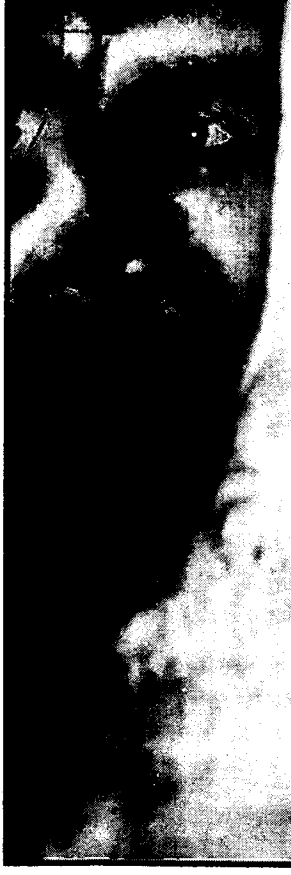
THIS SIDE OF JUDGMENT

J.R. DUNN



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The dragons of legend had faced craftsmen—swordsmen and archers who spent their lives studying the subtleties of their art. This creature was challenging the army of a modern, rationally organized kingdom—a monarchy in which ordinary, untalented louts could defeat the greatest heroes of antiquity by performing simple, repetitive acts.

They had decided they would have to think of the animal as a kind of moving fortress. They would have to batter it until something gave way. In the myths, Alsten had noted, it had usually been killed by puncture weapons, such as lances. There was even a legend that the elephant was its natural enemy. It was reasonable to think, therefore, that it might avoid the bayonet. Cannon balls and musket balls might penetrate its armor if they landed on a weak spot, but that would be a matter of luck.

Now, watching the creature stagger under a second hit from a cannon, von Wogenfer wondered if anything that size could be clubbed to death. Could you really hammer at its sides the way you weakened the walls of a fortress, shot by shot?

The dragon crouched and leaped again. This time it swerved to von Wogenfer's right and slowly gained altitude. It banked, like some monstrous hawk, and von Wogenfer heard Alsten gasp.

"It's going to swoop," Alsten murmured.

Von Wogenfer's stomach tightened. He had stood with his men as they watched enemy cannon being trained on their ranks, but this was something else. An enormous mass was falling on them out of the sky, in a long sweep that would carry it directly over the grenadiers stationed around the stake.

He threw back his head and bellowed a command in his native tongue—a language he used for almost no other purpose. "Grenadiers. Bajonette— *auf*."

The grenadiers raised their muskets above their heads without dropping to one knee. The thin, high shriek of the predator ripped at the air. Wings beat like thunder as the long, scaly body swept across the grenadier company. Claws reached for the princess through the massed bayonets. Human screams mingled with the noise of the monster. Some of the more enterprising grenadiers rose up on tiptoe and tried to slash at the white underbelly flowing past their points.

The animal was already climbing when it cleared the edge of the formation. The officers in the grenadier company were ordering their men to close ranks. The tall hats bobbed in a familiar pattern as the grenadiers filled in the gaps and let the walking wounded make their way through the formation. The dragon had been reaching for Costanze Adelaide but its claws had struck at some of the men massed around the

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stake. Somewhere in that blue-coated crowd, a corpse was probably being trampled by feet that were mechanically obeying orders.

Why would the thing want a human female? Did it need some special nutrient? Would it haul her to its nest for some purpose only a pornographer could visualize? Last night, during dinner, he had flustered Alsten when he and Colonel Torbmann had tried to imagine the pleasures a Hapsburg spinster could provide a flying lizard. Now its irrational objective was just one more sign he was faced with something that existed outside the laws of nature.

The thing had already executed an arc that carried it far above the farmland in front of the formation. It had gained so much height it looked as if it was roughly the size of a cow—but who had ever seen a cow equipped with wings? It pointed itself at the front of the formation and fell toward its quarry as if it was sliding down an invisible ramp in the sky.

This time it ignored Costanze Adelaide and attacked the grenadiers themselves. Its great claws reached through the upraised bayonets for the faces and bodies of the men holding them.

Its head was pointed directly at von Wogenfer as it swept across the formation. He was looking at it eye to eye as its feet mangled the troops he had placed in its path. Half the cavalrymen on both sides of him were leaning over their horses' heads and stroking their faces.

The long tube of the creature's body slid directly over von Wogenfer's head. The tips of its bloody, dripping claws were just a sword length from the top of his hat. A terrible retching odor permeated the air like a fog.

The corporal holding von Wogenfer's horse grabbed the bridle with both hands and opposed its straining muscles with the full weight of his body. Von Wogenfer ignored the struggle taking place beneath his thighs and concentrated on the scene he was supposed to be controlling.

Grenadiers were falling out of formation with their faces covered with blood. Fragments of blue coats flapped over glimpses of shredded upper bodies. Sergeants were beating the survivors into formation with their halberds. Behind him, the three lieutenants had drawn their swords and turned in their saddles as they followed the dragon's flight.

"Sheathe your swords!" von Wogenfer bellowed. "Keep your eyes on me! I'll tell you where to look!"

He had chosen a small dip near the top of the hill as a parking place for the wounded. The sergeants who had been chosen to deal with the casualties were shepherding the walking wounded up the slope. The men who couldn't walk were being dragged along the ground by their belts—if they still had belts.

The grenadier company had lost half a dozen men in the first strike,

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another thirty in the second. From what he could see of the men left in the ranks, at least ten of the wounded were still standing in the formation.

The thing struck at the center two more times. By the end of the fourth attack, the grenadier company had lost almost half its men—including a third of its sergeants and two officers.

Von Wogenfer gestured at Colonel Basel-Derhof while the tail of the monster was still thrashing above his head. "I believe it's time we sent in the reserve company, *mon ami*. If you will give the orders. . . ."

Basel-Derhof spurred his horse forward. His big, unforgettable voice rang across the formations. The grenadiers massed around the princess jerked to attention. They about faced in response to their captain's orders and snapped into a march.

It was one of the most difficult maneuvers an army could perform. A battered, limping unit had to vacate its position at top speed without yielding to fear and turning a retreat into a panic. The infantry forming one face of the square had to open a gap they could pass through. A second unit had to march, without hesitation, into the very place where men had been killed and crippled while it watched.

Von Wogenfer straightened in the saddle as he watched them step through the drill. Their erect heads and vertical muskets would have been an impressive sight if you had watched them execute the maneuver on the parade ground—but here they were doing it in the face of the enemy . . . as a thing that killed and slashed climbed into the sky and positioned itself for another descent.

He caught a brief glimpse of Costanze Adelaide as the monster approached the top of its climb. She was leaning forward, with her full weight on the stake, and methodically moving her wrists up and down as she rubbed her bonds against the wood. Then the blue mass closed around her. And the bolt began its fall.

He pulled his snuff box out of his pocket and turned back to Alsten. "Do you see why your father values discipline so much?"

The boy's eyes were locked on the dragon's approach. He looked confused—as if he had been jolted from a dream—and von Wogenfer turned away from him without waiting for an answer.

Von Wogenfer had shared many intimacies with his fellow officers, but there was one thought he had never revealed. He had developed an irrational respect for the soldiers he commanded. They were the worst, he knew. They were recruited from the leavings of the civilian population: from the lazy, the criminal, the unemployable. Most of them would be stealing and raping—or begging in the public squares—if they hadn't been bludgeoned or connived into putting on uniforms. Half of them

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would have been running like peasants by now if they hadn't known they were maneuvering under the eyes of officers who would shoot them down before they had finished the first step. But none of that seemed to matter when you saw them execute the kind of maneuver he had just witnessed.

The act sanctified itself. The motivation was irrelevant.

The monster released another scream as it closed with the formation but this time it seemed to him he could detect a different quality in the sound. A hundred shaken men had surrounded the stake when it had finished its last strike. Now two hundred straight, unwounded grenadiers stood there again.

The great claws struck. The long underbelly blocked out the sun for the fourth time and he noted the bloody lines marked by the bayonet points. Here and there he could even see bruises and round, red patches where musket balls had stuck home.

His heart jumped when he realized it was turning away without rising. It landed about a hundred and fifty paces in front of the formation and stared at its adversaries with its wings draped along the ground.

"It's tiring!" Alsten said. "We're wearing it down! We may not be hurting it, but we're wearing it down."

The two guns crashed as soon as the artillery officers realized they had a steady target. A shriek of pain—or was it rage?—clawed at the air. The animal twisted on itself, like a dog biting at a flea. It pointed its head at the sky, still screaming, and von Wogenfer stood up in the stirrups and peered at its thrashing body. It had obviously taken a cannon ball on its left side, but it had reacted by turning that side away from him. There was no way he could determine the extent of the damage.

The gunnery sergeants were chanting the gunnery drill on both sides. The dragon lowered its head and stared at the gun on the right—the gun that had probably fired the shot that had struck home. It stopped thrashing and eased its body around as if it was favoring its left side. Its wings rose above its back.

The grenadier companies posted behind each gun were an important component of von Wogenfer's battle plan. If the dragon attacked either piece, they were supposed to step forward and protect the gun in the same way the central grenadier company was protecting Costanze Adelaide. The company stationed behind the gun on the left was commanded by one of the best captains in the brigade—a middle-aged officer who would have been a full colonel if he had possessed the right connections. The company on the right—the company deployed behind the gun the dragon was eyeing—was commanded by a young man whose chief claim to preferment seemed to be the fact that he was Colonel Basel-Derhof's

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grandson. Von Wogenfer had tried to convince Basel-Derhof the grandson should be assigned to his staff. The colonel had insisted the company would be more reliable if it was commanded by "the leader it is accustomed to follow."

Now, as the animal readied itself, von Wogenfer watched the company for some sign the "leader it is accustomed to" had understood the situation. Colonel Basel-Derhof was a stolid, reliable officer, and his grandson seemed to be cut from the same thick, serviceable blue cloth. If you pointed either of them at the enemy and told them to advance, they would keep going as long as they had two men left to command. Unfortunately, the situation called for a company commander who could anticipate the enemy's movements and react without waiting for a direct order. . . .

The dragon leaped. Its wings thrashed downward in a single, powerful stroke. It sailed toward the gun with a gracefulness that would have made von Wogenfer gape in awe if he had been a detached observer.

Basel-Derhof's grandson had been waiting for the gun crew to finish reloading. The thing had already covered half the distance to the gun before he realized it was going to reach its target before the crew could light the touchhole. His startled voice floated across the hillside. His grenadiers pointed their bayonets at the sky and advanced at the quick step.

The gunners threw themselves flat. The animal's claws closed around the wheels of the gun. It struggled upward, like a hawk burdened with an over-sized rabbit. The bottoms of the wheels rose off the ground.

The grenadiers had continued to advance, as ordered. The animal was still struggling to gain altitude when the gun carriage collided with the front ranks.

The men in the first three ranks toppled like ninepins. There was a moment when the entire gun assembly hung over the hats and upraised muskets of the company. Then the barrel slipped out of the carriage. Several hundred pounds of brass fell on the men massed beneath the monster's body.

It was a situation Basel-Derhof's grandson could understand. He screamed an immediate right face. His company changed face without a break in the rhythm of its march and uncovered the men who had been downed by the gun. Broken bodies writhed on the grass. A hatless soldier rose to his knees and held up his arms as if he thought another blow was falling from the sky.

Von Wogenfer raised his eyes from the wreckage. The dragon had lifted itself to church steeple height. It rose a little higher and shrieked as it let the gun carriage fall. It dropped to the ground with another shriek and launched a red flare at the useless mass of splintered wood.

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Von Wogenfer gestured at Alsten. "How intelligent should we assume our adversary is, monsieur savant? Does it realize it can rove that flank at will, now that it's removed the gun?"

Alsten spread his hands like a Frenchman. "I can't say. So far it's acted like a beast. It launched itself directly at the princess without taking anything else into account. It didn't attack the gun until it was hit. This is probably the first time it's encountered artillery. It may not have realized there was more to the gun than fire. Now that it's been hit . . . now that it knows the gun is firing missiles. . . ."

The dragon was eyeing the formation over the smoldering remains of the gun carriage. This time it was positioned so von Wogenfer could see the place where the cannonball had struck its side. There were no holes, but it had acquired a large black blotch forward of its rear leg. One of its scales seemed to be dangling from a flap of skin.

If he had been the dragon, he would have eliminated the guns first. Then he would have burned his way through the infantry at his leisure. As Alsten had said, it could have acted like a mindless beast merely because it wasn't familiar with artillery.

Why shouldn't it be intelligent? It was a thing that shouldn't exist at all. Why shouldn't it be as cunning as Fritz himself?

He twisted in the saddle and gestured at the commander of the horse artillery team. "Captain Hoff—load with canister. Close with the enemy on my order. Maintain contact for as long as humanly possible. Try for a face shot if it gives you the opportunity."

He looked back and jabbed his forefinger at the lieutenant on the right. "Advise Major von Laun his men are to draw their swords. Two squadrons will advance behind me—with Major von Laun in command—if I signal with my sword at the vertical. He should maintain twenty lengths behind my position. He should be prepared to charge on command."

The dragon rose. It hauled its bruised body through the air and landed a short thirty paces from the men holding the right face of the square—in a position where it no longer had to fear a blow from a cannon. Its eyes glared down at the ranks standing before it.

Everything had to be timed with care. So far, it had stopped to take in air every time it had breathed fire. . . .

The animal's sides began to heave. It trained its open mouth on a soldier who had become as rigid as a statue. Von Wogenfer turned his head and raised his hat with the best imitation of a courtly gesture he could produce. "Now, Captain Hoff. If you please."

Mobile, horse-drawn guns were an important part of Frederick's tactical system. Frederick had borrowed the idea from the Russians but it

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was a concept that suited his talent for surprise and maneuver. A gunner was already sitting on the lead horse in the team that pulled the gun. His spurs bit as soon as Captain Hoff bellowed an order. The gun clattered down the hill with the artillery crew riding beside it.

Fire shot from the dragon's mouth. A red cloud engulfed a dozen human bodies.

Captain Hoff's horses swung into a turn as they approached the dragon's flank. They came to a halt with the muzzle of the gun fifteen paces from its target. The crew leaped from their saddles with the silent, intent speed of men who were performing acts they had executed thousands of times.

The dragon turned its head away from the carnage it had just created. Its eyes studied the artillery crew. The horse gun crashed before it could pull its bulk out of the line of fire. Hundreds of balls smashed into its side at point blank range.

Von Wogenfer had already spurred his horse forward and started trotting down the hill. He pointed his sword at the sky without looking back and Major von Laun gave his cuirassiers the appropriate order.

This time there was no doubt the creature was shrieking in pain. It threw its injured flank away from the cannon and von Wogenfer felt his heart bounce when he realized part of its left wing was flopping like a broken limb. Hoff had chosen his target with intelligence. If the thing could no longer attack from the air. . . .

Von Wogenfer spurred his horse into a canter. The sponger was already pushing his rod, with its water-soaked sponge, into the muzzle of the horse gun.

The dragon swung itself around—how could anything so big move so fast!—and focused its eyes on the gun. Its sides swelled as it sucked in air.

"Take your time," Captain Hoff was saying. "You wouldn't want the general to think I don't know how to run a gun crew, would you?"

The sponger smiled politely as he concentrated on his drill. Behind his back—twenty paces from where he was working—soldiers were sidestepping into the gap created by the dragon's last flame. Charred hulks were lying on the ground. Screaming, pain-maddened men were rolling on the grass.

Von Wogenfer halted his mount near the left wheel of the horse gun—at a point that would put him well within reach of the flame if the dragon aimed directly at the gunners. He tipped his hat to Captain Hoff and eyed the positions of the crew as if he was making sure their wigs were properly powdered.

Von Wogenfer had never fully understood the theory that explained the mysteries of combustion. He had always felt, in fact, that there was

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something fundamentally confusing about the phlogiston hypothesis attributed to Herr Schleer. Still, if the theory was correct, it would mean there was some logic to the long, slow breaths the monster was inhaling as it prepared itself for its next flare. If its body contained a source of phlogiston, then it was possible it was mixing the phlogiston with a proper quantity of air. They were, in a sense, engaged in a scientific experiment. Could a fire breather prepare a mouthful of flame before a Prussian gun crew could load and fire a horse gun?

The sponger pulled his rod out of the muzzle and stood to attention. If there was one job in the army that had to be done properly, it was the sponging of a cannon. A single grain of smoldering waste could set off the next load of powder while it was still being rammed into place.

A gunner stepped up to the muzzle and dumped a pre-packaged sack of powder down the barrel. A second gunner followed with the canvas tube that contained several pounds of tightly packed shot. The sponger reversed his rod and pushed everything firmly into place with the ram end.

Captain Hoff had been watching the monster's head as his men worked. The creature was crouching about twenty paces from the muzzle of the gun. Its neck was bent in a curve—like a striking snake. Its head was poised at about the height three good grenadiers might achieve, if they stood on each others' shoulders.

"Two degrees below maximum elevation," Captain Hoff ordered. "We'll go for the head. Don't fire until I give the command."

Von Wogenfer dribbled a line of snuff on his sleeve. It was the quietest battlefield he had ever fought on. He could even hear the clinking of the minor gear carried by the cavalry who were poised twenty paces behind him. The only sounds of any importance were the cries of the wounded and the huge sighs pouring down the dragon's throat as it sucked in more air.

He had posted himself beside the gun because he had thought his presence would help Captain Hoff steady his men. Now, watching them work, he knew they would have run through their drill if their general had been a league away. The only sign of anxiety was the way the eyes of the gun crew kept sliding toward the thing looming over them.

The dragon's sides stopped moving. The tip of its tongue curled into a trough and trained itself on the gun. . . .

"FIRE!"

There were times in battle when all your sensations seemed to be altered by the emotions that were battering at your reason. This time the bark of the command sounded louder than the roar of the cannon.

The flame shooting out of the animal's mouth painted everything around him with a red glow. There was a frightening, vivid moment

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when the gunners seemed to be working in the light and heat of a blacksmith's furnace. A huge shriek tore at his ears.

The moment passed. He raised his head and realized the flame had billowed over him. The dragon was backing away with its muzzle pointed upward—as if it had flinched when the gun had fired. Captain Hoff was already cracking orders. The sponger was stepping up to the muzzle.

He glanced back and verified that Major von Laun and his cuirassiers were unharmed. The major was a solid, decent man—a *bonhomme* in the best sense of the word—and von Wogenfer thought he saw a flash of sympathy in his eyes.

The animal had lowered its head. Its left eye was coated with blood. Streaks and patches of blood covered most of the left side of its face. It twisted its head to one side and glared at the gun with its right eye.

"Good shooting, Captain Hoff," von Wogenfer said. "Let's see how he likes another dose."

He turned in the saddle and cupped his mouth with his hands. "Major von Laun. If you'll be good enough to charge this thing. Keep it occupied."

Normally a general coordinated his troops by dispatching messages to his subordinate commanders. It was a ponderous system, but the enemy commander operated under the same limitation. Von Wogenfer's discussions with Alsten had made it clear he couldn't deal with this assignment by commanding through couriers. His enemy might not be intelligent but its "lines of communication" ran from its brain to the rest of its body. The fact that he had never fought such a thing had to be taken into account, too. He would have to make up some of his tactics on the spot. Every officer in the brigade had been advised, therefore, that he should be prepared to take direct orders from the general himself.

The animal still hadn't used one of its most formidable weapons—its massive bulk. It might be dazed and half blinded, but it could destroy the horse gun merely by blundering forward before the crew could fire another round. Should he be prudent and order the gun to withdraw? Or should he try to pin the thing down and get in another shot?

Later—if he lived—he would be able to explain his reasoning at length. He could probably fill three sheets of paper with a description of all the elements of the situation he was taking into account. Now he merely knew what the elements were. Now, his left hand was holding his sword and pointing it at the infantry platoons that were facing the creature's flank.

"By platoons—fire!"

It was an order they all understood—a call for the relentless rolling volleys of trained Prussian infantry. In the platoon closest to him, the men in the front line dropped to one knee and trained their muskets on the dragon's flank. The second line crouched and brought their muskets

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to their shoulders. The third line remained standing and leveled their weapons over the hats of the men in the second line. The platoon lieutenant shouted the order to fire, the muskets crashed, and the next platoon in the line fired as the men in the first platoon started reloading. By the time the platoon in front of the tail had fired, the first platoon had finished loading and assumed the firing position. A mist of white smoke covered the animal's side. Von Wogenfer saw a soldier fall out of line and realized he had been hit by a ball that had ricocheted off the dragon's hide.

Von Laun had led his cuirassiers in a sweep around the gun and swung them into a knee-to-knee onslaught on the animal's other flank. Their swords were extended stiffly in front of them, in the regulation position for a charge. They were charging a solid wall, not a mass of men, but they came on as if they thought their horses could drive through the dragon's side in the same way they might ride through the flank of an infantry regiment.

The dragon screamed. Its head swung from side to side as it tried to understand what was happening. A hot musket ball smoked in the grass two steps from the front left hoof of von Wogenfer's horse. On his right, Captain Hoff was once again directing the elevation of the gun. . . .

"*Ecrasez l'infame,*" Frederick said. "You have fulfilled your orders with commendable thoroughness, gentlemen. I hope your report on the creature's anatomical peculiarities won't fill more than six volumes, my young philosophe. Did the Hapsburg woman have anything interesting to say when she saw the results of your labors?"

"I'll prepare a summary just for you," Alsten blurted. "It really is an anomaly. When you calculate the nourishment a creature that size should consume in a single day, it becomes obvious it could gobble up the resources of a province in six months. Yet no one sees it for fifty years at a stretch. And when it does make an appearance—it vanishes as soon as it's presented with a sacrifice that serves no utilitarian function. I told the princess that and she said it wasn't *supposed* to make sense—that it was a creature out of myth."

Von Wogenfer turned to a servant who was standing near his shoulder. He removed a glass of wine from a tray and returned his attention to his sovereign. "She was praying for the souls of the men who had died in the engagement when I approached her afterward. She pointed out that her family had only sacrificed one princess every fifty years."

Frederick smiled. "A touching observation. Did you point out, in return, that this time the dragon was dead?"

"I did."

"And what did she say to that?"

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"She said her family had sacrificed one superfluous young woman every fifty years to save a province it had acquired by inheritance. We had sacrificed over one hundred soldiers to retain a province our king had stolen by force."

Frederick smiled again. His bright, cynical eyes regarded von Wogenfer over his glass.

"It's too bad you're already married, eh? You could have carried her back to her mother and claimed the traditional reward."

Von Wogenfer shrugged. In his mind, he could see the tableau Costanze Adelaide had created when she rose from her knees after he interrupted her prayers. She had stepped away from the stake, her crucifix in her hand, and made the sign of the cross as she surveyed the bodies still lying on the field. The words she had muttered had been taken from the Requiem Mass of the Roman church.

Lux perpetua luceat eis, Domine. . . . Let perpetual light shine upon them, O Lord.

"She is a woman of some spirit," von Wogenfer said. "Captain Kreutzen said she spent most of the battle trying to break free, so the animal could reach her."

Alsten flicked his cuff and put on a face that was obviously intended as an imitation of Frederick's world-weary disdain. "She asked me how we would deal with the monsters of Reason now that we had probably slain the last monster of legend."

"And you told her Reason doesn't produce monsters?" Frederick said.

Alsten's wine sloshed in his glass. His face reddened.

"As a matter of fact . . . yes."

The king waved his glass at his guests. "To what shall we drink, gentlemen? To success? To the hope that the monsters of Reason provide as much entertainment for future generations as the monsters of legend have provided for the past?"

"I think I would like to salute the fallen," von Wogenfer said.

Frederick regarded him again. The expression on his face changed.

Von Wogenfer had commanded a battalion at Rossbach. Afterward, a staff officer had told him about the incident that had become part of Frederick's legend. Frederick had been sitting on his horse watching two redcoated enemy regiments as they maintained their position under a savage battering from the Prussian artillery. He had asked who they were, the story went, and he had removed his hat and raised it in silent tribute when he had been told they were the Swiss regiments Planta and Diesbach—foreign soldiers serving in the army of Louis XV.

It was easy to forget who you were talking to, von Wogenfer had often reflected, when you visited the king in his palace. You watched this little

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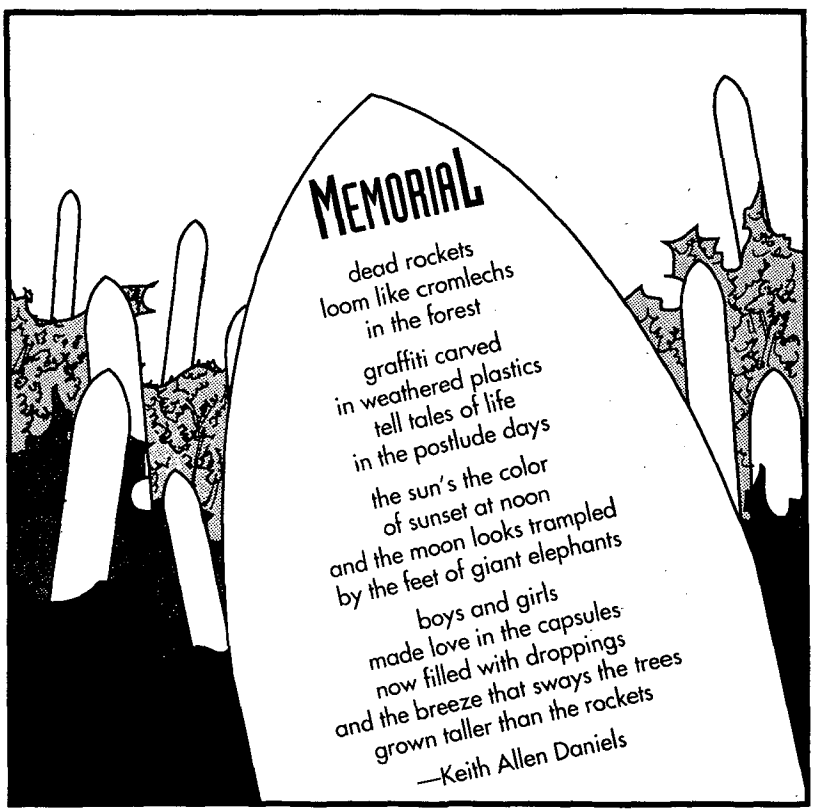
Frenchified intellectual play his flute with his court musicians. You heard him making mocking comments to his guests. If Frederick's father could return from the dead, he would observe the court life of Sans Souci and conclude his worst fears had been confirmed. He would be dumbfounded when he learned his strange son was a soldier who had participated in more battles than any king since Alexander of Macedon. He would have decided you were a lunatic if you had told him young Fritz was now called—like Alexander—the Great.

Frederick had continued to kill the Swiss, of course. But that wasn't the point of the story.

"To those who did their duty," Frederick said.

Von Wogenfer extended his arm. The three glasses glittered in the light from the French windows. ●



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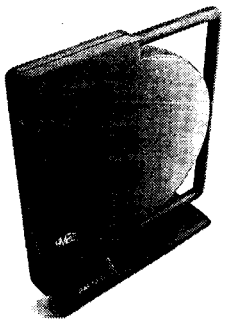

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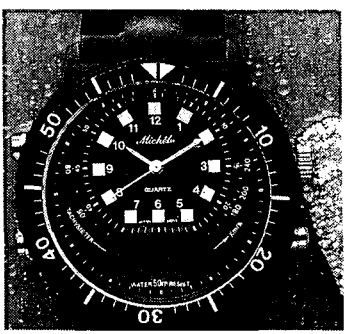

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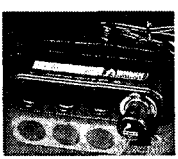

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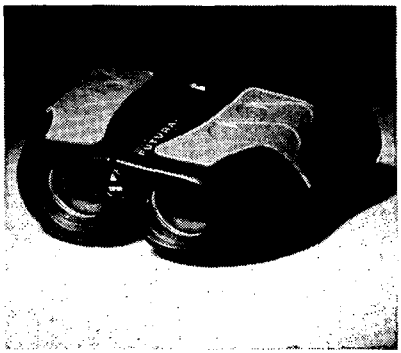

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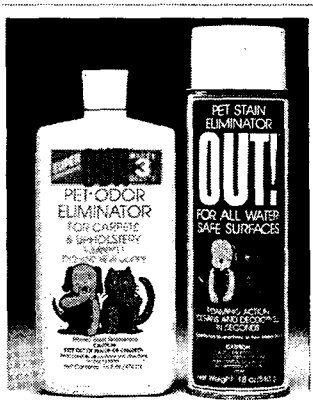

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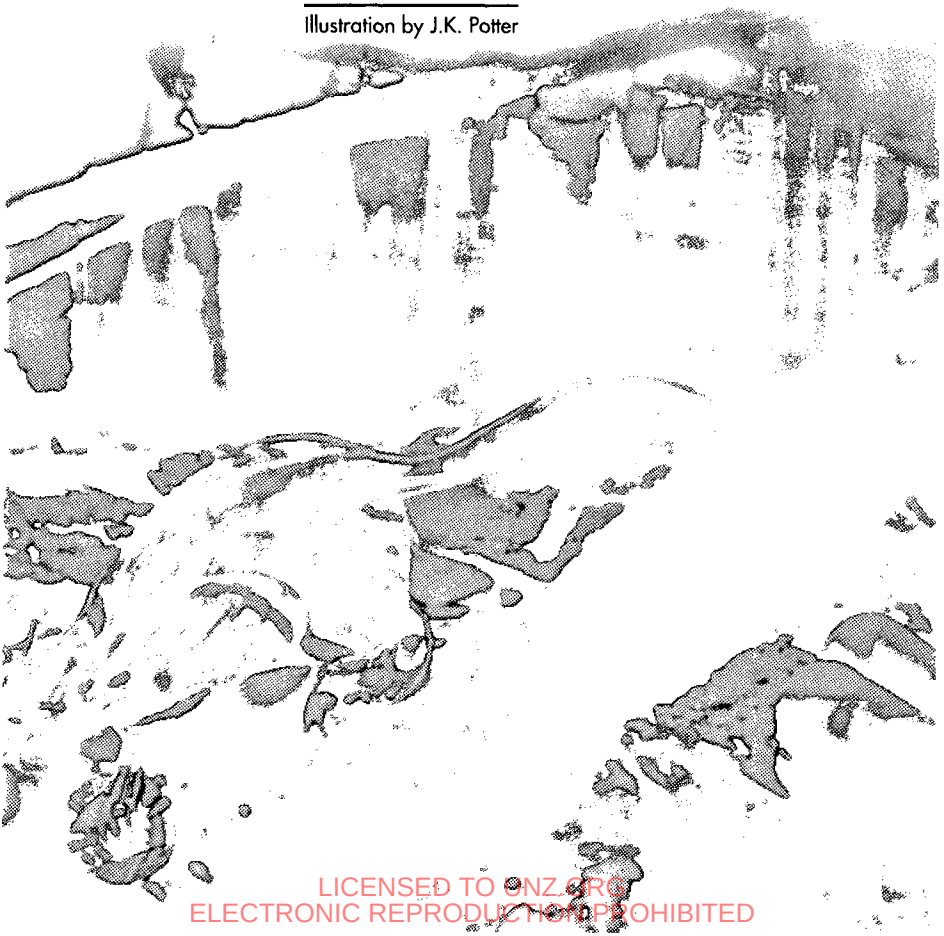
The author's editor at Del Rey Books, Ellen Key Harris, "deserves credit for this story. She suggested dirt rustling as a crime-of-the-future that might occur in the drowned L.A. I portrayed in 'Stairway' (*Asimov's*, May 1993). I started there, and then began to wonder about 'past,' and to what extent memory shapes and limits our daily behavior." From the synthesis of these ideas came...

RAT

Mary Rosenblum

Illustration by J.K. Potter



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Dusk is the best time to steal, out here in the bay. You'd think dark would be safer, but that isn't so. At night, people go on the alert. They listen when their watch-dogs bark, and the shackboats are full of watch-dogs. They grab for guns. At dusk, the day-jobbers are coming home, tired from chipping ice on the bergs, working the pier shops, or the flea-markets. They don't *look*. And the night folk are heading out, thinking about work, or food, or sex. Nobody much notices you, especially if you're small, like me.

And I don't like to get noticed. You look at a face, see a stranger. And maybe they're not a stranger. Maybe you stole something from them a week or two ago, or gave 'em mouth on the pier, and maybe they remember a little better than you do. You never know. So it's safer not to get noticed.

Anyway, I surfaced beside this barge and tied my raft up close. I could smell frying food from the next boat over, but their cookfire was at the far end, so nobody noticed me. My stomach growled, and I swallowed air to make it quit. I was being careful. No real close neighbors except for that one boat. Out here on the fringe of Ice Town it wasn't crowded—not like under the piers, where the shackboats are tied up so thick you can't even swim between them. And this garden-barge was *way* out on the fringe. Which was why I'd picked it. That and the dirt must be pretty clean. The plants and bushes looked real healthy. None of the yellow spots that mean heavy metal contamination. The soil could still be full of viruses, but I'd have to pay for a screen to find that out.

Clean dirt is worth good money on the piers. The arcologies buy it for their nice sealed gardens. You could see their lights coming on, up in the hills beyond the piers and the drowned oldcity buildings, like stars, only low and too bright. Sometimes I wonder what it would be like to look out at Ice Town from one of those windows. You drink berg-melt water, eat vegetables grown in nice clean dirt, and certified, farm-grown seafood. No toxins. No ugly new viruses. Not even the Monsoons bother the Towers.

I'm never going to get there, but they pay good money for the dirt I steal, so that's something, anyway. I checked my raft again, and levered myself onto the barge. Messy place. Corn stalks, climbing beans, some kind of bush with big red berries, all tangled up in squash and cuke vines. Like nobody took care of the place, only somebody did, because there weren't any weeds, or rotted vegetables. I crawled into the garden on my hands and knees, feeling for trip wires or booby traps, hoping this would be an easy job. I needed the money, bad.

I owed Eel Man, and the Eel likes to do nasty things to people who don't pay up. I pushed some vines aside, and cleared a little patch of soil. I can see about as well at night as during the day, even when there isn't

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much of a moon. I pulled my scoop and bag from the belt of my shorts, and shoveled a little dirt into the bag. I usually take three or four samples from different parts of a new barge. I'm working on this reputation for delivering clean dirt, and I don't want to blow it. If this sample tested okay, I could come back and keep coming back until the owner tumbled. I twisted the bag closed, and started to crawl through the tangle.

Cold touched my neck, nudged hard. Metal.

I froze, not breathing because it felt like a gun, wondering if I'd hear the shot, see anything as I died. . . .

"Digging for worms?"

Soft voice, male, close behind me. My heart slammed my ribs and began to pound in slow heavy strokes. I was still alive. I started to breathe again.

"Stand up."

I got up slowly. Carefully. From where I stood, I could see the lights and cook-fires of the Ice Town shackboats. Scum. That's how I usually think of the shackboat people; cheap labor good only for grinding up the bergs that train up from the South Pole. Right now, those flickering lights looked so damn wonderful.

"A kid." Sigh in the voice. "Don't move fast. You could have a gun, and since I don't plan on dying tonight, I'd have to shoot you."

Light exploded in my eyes, searing my night vision, and I almost, almost, raised my hand against it.

"How old are you?" The voice was old, or sounded old anyway. "Thirteen? Fourteen?"

I couldn't see. "I don't know."

"Don't give me that." A snarl. "I'm sick of hearing that from you kids."

"I *don't* know." I let myself get angry because the light *hurt*. And because it was the truth.

"Hold out your hand."

Huh? I stuck out my right hand, not sure what he was after. The light shifted downward, and I stared at my dirty palm. Long thumb. Three fingers. So what? I sneaked a look at his hand on the flash. Shorter thumb. Four fingers. But he sounded old. Old folks were different.

"No webbing." His voice was thoughtful. "I saw this kid swimming in the bay the other day. I think she had webbed fingers. I'm pretty sure, anyway." Tongue-click and the light slid up to touch my face again (not in my eyes, this time).

"You look pretty normal, mostly. Black hair, straight, not braided, so you're not gang. Hispanic? Face sort of looks it, but then you got those slanted eyes. Asian *and* Hispanic." He sounded like he was checking stuff off on a list. "Some Caucasian blood in there, too, but we whiteys

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worked our genes into every pool, didn't we? Rape kings. Your mom chips ice on the bergs, right? Or works the piers for ten bucks a job?"

"No." I was pissed, gun or not. "I'm not some animal, so stop talking like I am. I'm not shackboat scum. I'm an independent, okay? So what if I got three fingers? So what if I don't remember my mom, or how old I am. Who cares?" I clenched my fists, tasting salt from the bay on my lips. "What does it matter?"

"Yeah, who cares?" he said softly.

In the thickening dusk, the silent white mountains of the tethered bergs glimmered, their carved peaks precise, almost too perfect against the indigo sky. If I die, I won't see this, I thought, and felt a terrible ache in my chest.

"You want some supper?" The man's voice was real low. "You can leave your raft tied up here."

Supper? I turned right around to look at him because I couldn't help myself.

He was tall. Lanky and not as old as I thought. With this wild, curly red hair, all freckled, with eyebrows and lashes so pale that you couldn't even see them. Fair as he was, he should've been blind or had sun-cancer, but he wasn't. Didn't. He was grinning at me. And yeah, he carried a rifle—a squat ancient automatic. It wasn't quite pointing at me.

"If you're hungry, come eat. No strings attached. I just like company, once in awhile." One pale eyebrow rose. "Or you can leave. Without my dirt, thank you."

Leaving was the smart move, but a gust of wind brought the smell of food from the next-door boat again, and all of a sudden, I was trying not to drool down my chin. I heard myself saying, "Sure, thanks."

Idiot thing to do, because this guy was crazy, and you couldn't trust crazies.

Well, hell, you can't trust what passes for sane in Ice Town either. If I wasn't going to get any dirt samples tonight, I might as well get *something* for my swim out here. And I had a blade in the pocket of my wet shorts, of course. Which this guy hadn't checked for. So I followed him into his jungle.

And tripped, and fell flat on my face.

I struggled to my knees, tangled in bean vines, shins smarting where I'd banged something hard. The garden was full of junk; twisted wads of rebar, old car parts, maybe the guts out of some oldcity machine. Metal *stuff*. It was everywhere, covered up by the sprawling plants. Hidden, I figured. Half the raiders in Ice Town would be out here, if they knew about it. Metal, and you wouldn't have to sledgehammer it out of a concrete wall, or pry it out of some falling-down ruin. I untangled myself

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from whatever I'd fallen over. This stuff would be worth a lot, up on the piers.

"This way." The man swung his flash beam along the ground to show me the faint path. Then he walked on, left me in the dark.

I followed, picking out the dark shapes of all that junk, figuring what you'd get for it in the flea-markets, wondering why the old guy kept it. Sooner or later, somebody was going to tumble, and he'd lose it all. I was so busy looking, that I walked into the clearing before it even registered. It wasn't big—not even ten meters across, floored with scraps of old carpet or something, lighted—sort of—by a solar lantern hung from a pole. A shack made out of scrap boards and plastic tarps took up a lot of room. More junk walled the space, like a fence. Only it wasn't just junk.

I stopped still, breath going on hold as it all came into focus. A dog lolled its metal-mesh tongue, grinning this doggy grin. A woman leaned over it, winking at me as she petted its scrap-metal back, her fingers rusty, cobbled of old springs and machine screws . . .

. . . and *real.*

People were all around me, sitting, standing, playing with dogs or cats, smiling, or frowning, looking at me, or away. All made of junk, yeah, but all so real that I felt this shiver down my back, like I get when I'm on the piers and it's crowded. The lantern swung in the night-wind, and the moving shadows made them breathe. I took a step backward. A cat scratched its back against a little boy's knees, wire-fur standing up on end, battered-spoon tongue showing, looking like it should hiss and bolt any second. The kid was giving me this lip-curled look, like he knew just who and what I was, and I felt my cheeks getting hot.

Yeah.

That real.

The kid's face was nothing but a few scraps of metal, but I'd *know* that face if I met him on the street. And I'd punch him.

"Sit down." The man was bending over this little cookstove, ladling food into a bowl with a plastic mug. "I'm Kay. Here."

I took the bowl he handed me, numb, not sure how long I'd been staring at his statues. Then the steam coming up from the bowl snagged my attention, and my knees got shaky. I sat down quick, stuck a spoonful into my mouth. For a few minutes anyway, I didn't notice the junk-people at all. There was even meat in the stew—a little bit—pale and stringy.

"It's rabbit," Kay said.

Like I cared. The bowl was empty. I stared at it, wondering how I'd managed to do that so fast.

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"What's your name?" He dumped more stew into the bowl. "You remember *that,* right?"

"I'm Rat," I mumbled around a scalding mouthful.

"Rat, huh?" Musing. "Who named you that?"

"Me." I paused. "I think. I like rats. They're smarter than a lot of people I know."

"Yeah, they are. They've mutated smarter." He was smiling a little, and his hazel eyes looked gold in the soft glow from the solar lantern. He nodded. "I think they'll inherit the Earth, myself."

A rat sculpture crouched beside the shack. It was looking straight at me, ears pricked, a kind of amused smirk on its face that made the hair on my neck stand up. Yeah, smart, and it was laughing at me. Or maybe at all of us. If I really focused, I could see how it was just the old rusty frame from a rollerskate, plus a few odds and ends of pipe, scrap wire, and so forth. "How come you do this?" I asked. My voice came out as rusty as the rat-sculpture.

"How come?" Kay sighed. "I don't know. Because I'm lonely, I guess. These are all people I used to know. They lived here back before the Quake, back before the Ross Ice Shelf fell into the ocean and what was left of LA drowned."

"Nobody's that old." I stared at him, counting the few threads of white in that red mop. He was thirty-five or forty, max. He was grinning again, but it was a bitter, twisted sort of grin.

"It wasn't *that* long ago. But you're almost right." His eyes gleamed like polished gold. "Back then, science was taking on human aging; working with genes, viruses, and cell death." He shrugged. "I was a guinea pig. And then the Quake ended the experiment." Sculptured faces seemed to grin with his dry chuckle.

Maybe they did grin. I shivered, and thought a lot harder about leaving. Like right now.

"I guess it worked, or maybe it worked in a way they didn't expect. I don't know. They weren't around to tell me, when I figured out that I wasn't getting old very fast. I got to see a lot of change." He got this strange expression on his face as he leaned forward to take the stew-pot off the stove. "Tell me about not remembering."

"What about it?" I was listening to him with half an ear, watching those shadowy faces watch us. "I mean, things happen, but I mostly forget. Unless I need to remember, I guess." I remember *how* just fine; how to get home, how to do dirt-stealing without getting shot, how to get the stuff tested. It's the *who* that fades first.

"The past doesn't matter to you? What about your mother, your friends when you were little? You really don't know how old you are?"

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The urgency in his voice made me look away from those real/unreal eyes. "No." I shrugged. "What does it matter?"

"Good question."

He sighed again, like he was really tired, reached for my bowl and stacked it inside his. "You know, all the plants are different from when I was born." He jerked his head at the garden jungle. "They handle a lot of salt water, drought, heat. Plants mutate all the time. They don't have any memory, I guess. Except what's coded into their DNA." He laughed softly. "You know, between viruses, UV, and pollution, we've created our environment to mutate the hell out of everything." He lifted his head, fixed those golden eyes on me. "Which is maybe important, considering the changes our planet is going through. Maybe we're finding a way to keep up, to adapt." He was talking in that low voice again, like he wasn't really talking to me.

"Homo sapiens. That's me. If I eat the mussels that live under the piers, sooner or later I'll die of the toxins. I bet you eat them." He gave me a piercing glance.

"Well . . . yeah." I hadn't thought about it much. Some people can, some can't. "They taste like shit, and sometimes I get sort of sick, but I can handle them okay."

"Your immune system has mutated to deal with all the crap we've dumped into the sea." He poured water from a plastic jug into a pan, began to rinse out the bowls. "Humanity is evolving, and pretty damn fast."

He was losing me. I stifled a yawn, made drowsy by all that food.

"And I'm like you." He laughed that soft, dry laugh again. "Different. I'm like you, and the rats, and that girl I saw with the webbed fingers. Not really like you, because somebody did *me* on purpose, and you're something new and random." His eyes were glistening like molten gold. "This is a crap shoot, and only God knows what'll turn up on the table. Or maybe he doesn't even know because he's our God, and not yours. You're the new species, you know. Homo novum. That sort of means *new human*. And you don't have any past. Maybe that's on purpose." He stared out at the pale distant mountains of the tethered bergs. "We've been around too long. We've got too many yesterdays. They weigh us down. They keep us from changing. Maybe that's why you can't remember. Maybe we have to let yesterday go, if we want to adapt fast enough to keep up with tomorrow."

Spooky words. They scared me, and I didn't know why. "I ought to head out now."

"Have you ever been in love?"

He had this really focused look on his face, and I backed up fast. "I'm

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not a virgin, if that's what you mean." I took another step back, one eye on the opening to the path.

"Relax." He turned his back on me, walked across the tiny clearing. "You know, time isn't linear. We think it is, we think we live our lives along this nice straight line that begins at birth, ends at death, and proceeds through yesterday, today, tomorrow, like you'd walk along a sidewalk. That's not how it works. Time is folded back on itself, infinitely. Every moment touches every other moment. God is forever creating the universe." He stopped in front of a sculpture half hidden in shadow. "Sometimes when you catch the right scent of frying peppers and sweat, or musty socks on a wet day, or you hear the right snatch of the right song . . . you're *there,* so close you could touch that yesterday. And the barrier is so damn fragile . . . " His voice caught, cracked. "And I can't ever stop being that ten year old who smelled those peppers, that thirty year old who wept over a stupid love song. It's . . . who I am."

I looked at the sculpture he was facing. It was a man, one arm crooked, mostly built of twisted wire. You didn't notice the junk that made him up at all. He was that real. Longish hair, high cheekbones, wideset eyes. Handsome and young. If I ever saw this man on the street, I'd know him in a minute.

The moving shadows gave him life, filled his face with gentleness and love. It tugged at me, that face, brought me a step closer. Any second now, he'd reach out, put his arm around my shoulder, and . . . and everything would be all right. I shivered again, hurting in this weird empty sort of way. Kay had stepped inside that lifted arm—it fit gently around his shoulders—and was resting his forehead on the man's chest. His shoulders jerked once, and I wondered if he was crying.

"Who was he?" I whispered. *Was.* I didn't even have to ask.

"David." Kay lifted his head, touched the beautiful metal face. "We were together for fifteen years. He died in the Quake."

"Oh." I wanted to cry. Because I was jealous. Because he was dead.

"You can feel it," Kay said softly. "Yesterday. Old things are covered with it, like city grime." He smiled, a fragile twitch of his lips. "Some nights, it's like I can almost step across into yesterday, the barrier's that thin. Maybe one day . . . I'll do it." He ducked from beneath the sculpture's frozen embrace. "You can sleep here tonight." His golden eyes rested on my face. "If you'd like to."

"No thanks." I edged away again, because I know horny when I see it. "I don't think so."

"It was just an invitation." His shoulders lifted and dropped in a tiny shrug. "Dinner was free. Sex and love aren't the same thing, did you know that? Maybe not." He laughed a soft, sad note. "Maybe that's something we've had to give up. Love. Love requires memory, doesn't it? Good

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night, Rat." He turned his back on me and the sculpture, walked over to the tarped shack. "Turn off the lantern when you leave, okay?" He went inside and dropped the flap behind him.

The wind whispered secrets in the leaves and swung the lantern so that David smiled at me. All around me faces peered from the garden shadows, winking, grinning, whispering with the wind's voice. Kay's yesterdays. And David's. Not mine.

Do you have to remember, to love? I looked at the lantern, thinking how I could get something for it at the market, could take all the dirt samples I wanted now. Shit, why not? Slowly, I walked across the clearing, reached for the lantern. David was watching me, smiling at me. A little sadly?

I'd never thought about love much. Love, I mean, not just getting laid. Love. Sex. They're not the same, Kay had said. What did he know? I yanked the lantern from its hook, crossed the clearing in three long strides. Shadows skittered across the crappy carpeting, making the sculptures writhe like they hurt. In front of Kay's shack, the rat sculpture grinned at me, its face full of amusement and scorn.

I stopped. Turned off the lantern. Set it down on the ground.

"I hate you," I said softly. And I didn't have a clue why.

I ran down the path, night-vision showing me the faces under the tangled vines, giving them sneers, or scornful stares. My raft was where I'd left it. I untied it and slid off the edge into cold-water shock, mind contracting with my skin, focusing on no-air, muscle bunch and pull, *cold*. I surfaced when I couldn't stay down any longer, towing the raft down one of those shifting lanes that open and close between the Ice Town shackboats.

Two little girls squatted naked on the edge of a crummy barge. One of them was pissing. Her urine trickled over the edge of the barge into the water. Her eyes were night-black, all pupil. Like mine. I couldn't see her hands. I dove, and swam on.

Lanes open and close in Ice Town, and it took me a long time to work my way back to my haul-out under the piers. Far above, people bought, sold, hooked, traded, and stole on the shrunken planks. Something *thumped* overhead as I climbed the footholds I'd nailed to the piling above the waterline. A falling crate? A falling body? Down here, not even my night vision was much help. I had to grope my way up, dragging my raft along behind, because some jerk would steal it if I left it in the water.

This pier had been built between two old buildings, huge old office towers with rows of gaping, glassless windows. Their barnacle-encrusted flanks walled darkness beneath the pier, filled the dank air with the

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rhythmic suck and slap of water flowing through busted-out windows. Black mussels crusted the walls and pilings like shiny, lumpy armor. I could eat them. Kay couldn't. I wondered how I'd come to build my platform up here.

I couldn't remember building it. Why should I? I knew where it was, how to find it from any place in Ice Town, or on the piers. *How* it got to be here, why and when, that wasn't important.

I wondered if Kay would think it was important.

I'd never thought about it before; the past. Memory. I mean, today turned into yesterday. Why keep it around?

I wouldn't be able to remember old Los Angeles, or the Quake, or any of that stuff, not even if I was Kay's age. And so what? I flung the raft onto my platform, pissed. What *good* did it do him to remember? David was dead, right?

Maybe not for Kay.

I scrambled onto the planks of my platform, anger like a stone in my chest. If there had ever been a David in my life, I didn't remember. And so what? I hung the raft on its peg, and pried the lid off my water-bucket. Just over my head, the planks shook with the pier's night life, and dust sifted down onto my head.

The water shivered in the bucket, making my reflection waver and tremble. It looked flat and unreal, like a 2-D picture painted by a flea-market artist, like a slice of *present*. With no past and no future to give it depth? That's what Kay would maybe say, anyway. The anger sank from my chest to my gut, turned into this dark, sticky, sad feeling.

All his talk about love. I don't look half bad, for all I'm small, and I'm no virgin. I know how to read a come-on, how to say yes. Or no. I remember the moves, it's just the names I forget, the faces; who they were, what they said and how they said it.

I put the lid back on my bucket, hung it on its hook. All of a sudden, the platform was full of shadows, and they were all crowding me, whispering in my ears with the voice of the wind on Kay's garden barge. So I climbed the piling, and pushed aside the trap door I'd cut into a couple of planks behind a shower-house. Water's always leaking from it, and the edges of the cut planks were slimy with rot. Stunk, too. *I* wouldn't pay for a shower in that place. They probably use bay water diluted with cheap, treated gray-water. Wonder what the infection rate is . . . I replaced the planks and kicked a few bits of trash across to hide them.

Three old men sat with their backs against the wall of the drink-shack next to my shower house, sharing a joint. Caged chickens, rabbits, and guinea pigs squawked and snuffled in cages hung in the glassless windows of the ruined office tower that anchored the pier. People hawked food and entertainment. Daytime was for buying and selling basics, like

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veggies and dressed meat. Night was for fun and profit. I felt myself pulling in, going tight and careful. Watching faces. Who are you? Do you know me?

The chapati girl was in her usual place, slapping dough into flat cakes to bake on her little stove. She's my age, and she likes me. I think if I make her laugh, she'll give me a chapati or two. I wandered over, restless with something that didn't come from my belly, but felt like hunger anyway.

"Ho." She tilted her head, looking up at me through her lashes, hands never missing a beat.

"Ho." I squatted beside her, admiring the clean line of her jaw and neck, her almond-shaped eyes, and sleek black hair pulled into an ornate knot at the nape of her neck. She had a tiny fiberlight tattoo on her right cheek; a neon-blue rose. So beautiful . . . what made me think that—*beautiful?* It was more than just a flesh thing, too. *She* was beautiful. Maybe it was Kay's lust, or the David statue, but whatever the reason, I was suddenly really hard.

She dropped her gaze, getting the message, and giggled. "You want a nice chapati, right?" A quick hot glance through those long lashes. "You hungry?"

I shook my head, and wondered suddenly if I'd ever made love to her. Was she one of those faces that I'd forgotten, remembered only as touch and feel; do this and *this* happens . . . ? Was that why I thought *beautiful?* Was that why the hard-on? "How come you like me?" I blurted. "Were we . . . like *together?* What do you remember about us?"

Her blank look made her face, for one second, ugly.

The old men were cackling like the scrawny chickens above their heads. I ignored them. "So what *do* you remember?" I touched her arm, felt skin and muscle. Anyone's skin. Anyone's arms. "Please?"

"Hey, I don't know." She looked down at my fingers on her wrist. "Yeah, sure I remember you. We . . . went for a walk together. And you bought me smoked mussels." She began to stroke the back of my hand, her eyelashes fluttering. "It was nice. Want to come by later? Go for another walk?"

She wasn't a very good liar. I looked down at her hand and mine. "Maybe later." She didn't remember, and I wasn't horny anymore. Just sad, and not sure why. "Sure, I'll come by later." I slid my hand from beneath hers and walked away.

Maybe I *would* come back. We could walk out to the end of the pier, and I could buy her smoked mussels, like she'd said. And maybe we'd make love in one of the creches you can rent by the hour. And tomorrow, or next week, would I remember that I'd made love with her? Would I remember how she smiled, or what made her laugh? Or would I hang

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out and talk, wondering why she liked me, and why I thought she was beautiful. And she would smile and I'd get a hard-on, and I'd ask her to go for a walk, and we'd do it all over again. . . .

I'll never sculpt a statue of her.

The pier suddenly seemed too crowded. Smoke from somebody's torch or cookfire stung my nose, and I sneezed. Too many voices babbled; chanting, singing, calling out, or just talking. Shrill. Loud. How many of you remember? I turned slowly, faces blurring, brown, tan, gold. Eyes everywhere, glittering in the light of solar lanterns and torch-flames, glowing with their own light. Young eyes and old eyes, and to me, the young eyes looked too bright, like bits of polished metal reflecting back the light. And the old eyes looked like holes into dusty, forgotten rooms. Cluttered rooms, full of junk.

I was still turning slowly, dizzy now, gathering scornful, curious, bored stares. I stopped still, the pier planks trying to move under my feet, then I broke into a clumsy run. I just wanted to go home, back to my platform that I didn't remember building, or finding. Back to the safe darkness under the pier.

I couldn't stop looking at faces, trying to *remember,* wondering if I'd loved or hated any of them, and maybe it didn't matter, but I'd never *know.* And I wished I'd never climbed onto that damn barge.

The three old men were gone, and the chapati girl was busy with a customer. I ducked around behind the shower house, squatted in the darkness to lift my trapdoor planks.

A hand closed in my hair, yanked me to my feet as a hard forearm clamped across my throat. Choking, I struggled, but black spots were already dancing in front of my eyes.

"Wait by a rathole long enough, you catch the rat." Soft words, carried on a wave of garlic. I gagged, knees going soft, needing to *breathe.*

"The Eel's not feeling generous this week. You get to be an example to the rest of the slackers."

The arm wasn't going to let go, was going to keep on squeezing until I was out cold. He wasn't going to kill me, oh no. Only the Eel killed. I struggled to keep my feet under me, to win a little breath.

"Unless you can pay right now." The forearm relaxed just a hair, and the other hand grabbed my wrist, twisted it behind my back. "You got five seconds."

Agony. Breathing *hurt,* my arm was about to break. I gasped, on my knees, shaking all over. Death. Between it and me, a hell of pain and dying. The light and crowds just beyond this pool of shadow might as well be another world. If I screamed, if I *could* scream, no one would even look. And by tomorrow, or next week, the chapati girl would have forgotten me.

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"Don't," I whispered. Shivering. "I . . . can pay." Each word a ragged, burning breath. "I know where . . . there's metal. Ready to sell."

"Do you?" A sneer. He didn't believe me.

"It's on this . . . barge." I clamped my teeth on a cry as he twisted my arm higher. "I'll tell you where." The words tumbled out and I let them come, numb, nothing but a bag of skin full of pain and death-fear. "Out on the fringe of Ice Town, between here and the bergs."

A moment's silence, then; "Tell me."

I told him because I didn't want to die. And when I was done, he flung me onto the pier and kicked me in the ribs. I lay curled around the new pain, listening to his retreating footsteps. They beat contempt on the rotting planks, and I shuddered, closed my eyes.

Cold seeped into my guts. I'd just sold Kay to save my ass. Because I was afraid to die. After awhile, I crawled over to my planks, fumbled them aside, and let myself down onto my platform. I didn't bother to replace the planks. My ribs hurt too much, and I was going to have to move anyway. Eel knew where to find me, now. I reached for the water bucket, gasped as my ribs stabbed me. Broken?

Was that why I'd made this platform? Because someone had found out the last place I'd lived?

Death seemed so . . . blank. Like this wall, with nothing on the other side. It scared me shitless. Would it be easier to die with a lifetime of memory behind you? Or harder? Curled around my pain, I hated myself for selling Kay. And I hated Kay for loving David all these years. If I made a sculpture of the chapati girl, it would be just that—a sculpture of a girl. And I would still walk the piers and look at faces that were just faces. And be alone.

Nightmares woke me, dreams of the garden barge burning, of the sculpted David screaming as he melted into flowing tears of gold. And I heard Kay weeping. With a strangled cry, I sat up, slick with sweat, my shorts as damp as if I'd been in the bay again.

It was dawn. Beyond the pier, light caught the rising smoke from the Ice Town cook fires as it flattened into a silver haze. A bank of fog hung offshore, and I shivered, my skin thick and bumpy with cold. My ribs hurt with every breath. Pain meant life, anyway. When you were dead, you didn't hurt.

Death was death, with or without a past.

Kay had given me stew. He'd told me about loving David, had given me trust as a gift. I wondered if anyone had ever trusted me before.

I had sold him out. In a few days, in a week or two, I wouldn't remember.

I got to my knees, sweating in spite of the cold air. If I was lucky, Eel

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hadn't raided the barge yet. Why hurry? It wouldn't go anywhere. He could take his time to get a crew together. He owned this part of Ice Town and he could do whatever he damn well pleased.

I let myself down over the edge, *carefully*, made it onto the first of my footholds before my ribs hit me again. Trying not to breathe, I clung there, waiting for the worst of the pain to ease off. One careful step down, another. If I held my upper body very still, it wasn't too bad.

And every so often . . . it was.

It wasn't until I was almost down that I realized I'd left my raft behind. I looked up, dizzy and faint. It might as well be a million miles away. Teeth clenched, I reached downward for the next toehold. I probably couldn't swim anyway, so what did it matter?

It was crazy to go out to Kay's barge at all. He might guess it was me who sold him out, he might shoot me. You could die for a whole lot less reason in Ice Town. Cold water rose around my foot, slapped the mussel-encrusted piling. The shells gleamed like wedges of polished obsidian. I could eat them. Kay couldn't. I could do okay in this world. Because I could forget?

The incoming tide had pushed the nearest shackboat right up against the piling. I leaped onto the stern, yelping as my ribs grabbed me again. An old man peered through a crack in the shutters covering the shack's single window. Asian. Wrinkled and yellow. I think I knew what he did, once. I hurried forward, stepped off the corner of the squared-off bow onto a crappy raft built on blue plastic chemical drums. Yellow light seeped from behind a curtain, bright in the early dawn. A dog yapped. Shit. I ran, clutching my side, awkward and slow. Someone let the dog out, and it snapped at my ankles as I hopped over to the next boat. This one was big. Pretty nice, for Ice Town.

The dog on board was big, too.

It came at me fast, not barking. Bad. I ran, hurting like hell, reached the end of the barge. Teeth stuck my leg, and I heard a man's deep yell behind me. I kicked, felt muscle, fur, heard a muffled yelp. Big gap between me and the next boat. The dog went for my leg again and I jumped.

Missed.

Water closed over my head and the pain in my ribs almost made me forget to hold my breath. Clutching my side, I kicked, came up choking. I could just do it. Swim, sort of. A piece of drifting chipboard gave me something to hang onto and that helped. Slowly, I made my way out toward Kay's barge. The Eel would take his time, I told myself. He didn't like to come off as sloppy or in a rush. Part of his image. So I had time. Kay had time.

Time to do *what?*

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I didn't want to answer that one, maybe didn't really know. So I concentrated on cold water and the awful hurt in my side. Which wasn't hard to do.

Meter by meter, I passed the shackboats, finally reached the barge. The sun was up now, and daytime Ice Town was coming alive. Dogs barked. Kids were yelling. I crawled onto the deck of the garden barge and lay there shivering in the early sun. Moist earth-smell, whisper of leaves. I wondered what they were saying about me. "Kay?" Feeble call. "Hey, Kay!" Maybe he wasn't there. Maybe I could leave.

"Rat?"

Rustle of footsteps through leaves, then he was kneeling beside me, hand on my shoulder.

"Are you hurt? What happened?"

He was worried about me. *Me.* I started to laugh, but it hurt my throat almost as bad as it hurt my ribs.

"Come on, let me help you." He was trying to get me onto my feet, gold eyes full of worry, his red hair glowing in the bright morning sun.

I sort of helped, couldn't say a word between the hurting in my side and the hurting in my throat. So I let him haul me along toward the clearing and his shack.

"Sit down." He eased me onto the ground. "I've got a first aid kit. What happened to your ankle?"

My ankle? I looked down, noticing that smaller pain now. Blood smeared the top of my foot. "Dog bite."

He'd gone into his shack for the first aid kit. David was watching me, his face full of love and warmth. If anyone has ever looked at me like that, I've forgotten. Maybe they have, too. I sucked in a breath that felt like a sob. "You got to leave here," I managed. "For awhile."

"Why?" Framed in the shack's doorway, he paused, one pale brow rising. "I can't leave here."

"I . . . the Eel is going to come out here." I wanted to look away, couldn't. "To raid you. For the metal. I . . . I heard it on the pier." I couldn't look at David whose shining eyes were fixed on Kay. "He'll kill you if you're here, but you can come back. After. He won't bother with the dirt, and you can trade for new junk, do more people. . . ." The words ran out.

He looked at me. I couldn't read his face, but his eyes had gone shiny and flat, like the metal eyes of his sculptures. "Why?" he asked.

He knew. That I'd sold him out. Scared shitless, I opened my mouth to say no, tell him that I'd heard about it in the market, that I'd overheard these three old men talking about it. . . . "Eel was going to kill me." I looked away from those shiny, lifeless eyes. "You got to leave," I said.

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"They're alive, don't you understand." His eyes shifted to David's face. "I can't leave."

"You stupid old . . . "

"No."

It shut me up, that one word. It had the sound of the wind when it comes in from the ocean; cold, and empty, and full of space.

"This is my world." Kay was talking to David, not to me. "I can't leave you. I can't live out there, I don't belong. I haven't for a long time, now."

The fog was moving in, thick and white, hiding Ice Town and the bergs, hiding everything, so that there was just Kay, and me, and his people, and nothing else. I shivered, damp, cold, the hairs rising on the back of my neck because I could *see* them. Kay's friends. The fog blurred the gears and the springs, the broken car parts, and the old wire, turned it to flesh and hair and fabric. The lady with the dog winked at me, turned her smile on Kay. And the kid smirked, cocky little prick. They were *real*, and they were whispering to him. I could almost make out the words. And I could feel it. Old Los Angeles, full of cars, and people, and smog, just like you see in the VR historicals. It was right out there, and if the fog didn't hide it, I'd be able to see it. No, Kay wasn't going to leave. I turned slowly. David was smiling at me, flesh and blood real, full of warmth, and laughter. Full of love.

"I hate you," I said to Kay. Softly. "Because . . . you love David. And he loved you, and you'll always have it. Love. For all your life." And I have tomorrow, yeah, but tomorrow isn't here yet, and it's not much comfort. "You were wrong," I said, and my voice cracked. "You don't need memory to love. You just need memory to remember."

Sound of a boat motor in the distance. A big one, getting close. Eel Man and his crew.

"It hurts," I said. "If this is hating. It really hurts." Something dripped off my chin. Fog? I touched my face, fingertips sliding in warm wetness. Tears. I was crying. I've never cried before, or if I have, I've forgotten. The tears blurred fog and sculptures until they melted into streaks of color and white fog-glow. "I've only got now," I whispered. "No before. No after. Just *now*." At the other end of the barge, a bow *thunked* against the hull. Sound really travels in the fog. I turned away, adrenaline spiking me, because in a few minutes they'd find the path, come busting in here. And I really didn't want to die.

And besides . . . I was going to forget all this.

"You bastard," I said.

"Why?"

His soft whisper stopped me at the mouth of the path. I looked over my shoulder, breathing shallow and fast. "Because I'm alone," I said.

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"And I didn't know that, before you." Then I turned back and grabbed the rat statue.

Yeah, this is our world, us and the rats. And I ran down the path through the fog, stumbling, teeth clenched on the pain so that Eel's crew wouldn't hear, clutching the rat under one arm. At the edge of the barge I stopped, teetering on the brink, wrapped in cold damp whiteness. And I looked at the rat. It stared back at me, its eyes knowing, grinning its sly grin. *Yeah, brother, we inherit tomorrow, you and I. Not yesterday, but tomorrow. And who knows. Maybe we'll do it better.*

Yeah, maybe. We'll do it different, anyway. We can't help it. And I couldn't swim one-handed and carry it, and I wondered why I'd even picked it up. Because maybe, if I looked at it every day, I'd remember Kay for awhile?

I didn't want Eel to have it.

I leaned out over the water, meaning to let it drop. A hand grabbed my arm and I yelped; a smothered squawk of sound.

"Don't." Kay's voice was gentle. "I like the rat."

He took it from my hands, tucked it under his arm. "Why did you come back to warn me?"

Pinned by his eyes, I couldn't look away. "You trusted me," I whispered. "And . . . you love David."

He looked out into the fog. "Love." He let his breath out in a slow sigh and his face twisted as if he was in pain. "I guess we have to swim. I don't know." He looked down at the rat beneath his arm, stroked its metal head. "Maybe I let memory take the place of love. Are you sure you can swim?"

I nodded. That lump in my throat had gotten bigger, softer, had filled up my chest. It was kind of a warm feeling, even though it hurt. "The dirt'll still be here." I almost whispered. "You could plant more stuff after the crew leaves."

"Yeah, I guess I could." His face tightened again, as if he hurt as bad as me. "You could do that, couldn't you? Come back here and start over? Yesterday wouldn't haunt you for long. You wouldn't compare it to today. It would all be new. A clean slate. So you could just keep going on, forever."

I didn't understand what he was saying, could only stand there staring into those strange golden eyes.

"Yeah, you could do that." His shoulders slumped and he sighed. "I think maybe . . . I envy you. I think . . . I want you to work for me. On the barge, here."

He was offering me . . . a job?

"You owe me." Harsh words, but his eyes were full of shadows. "You owe me for my past. It's gone and . . . I need you. Because the past doesn't

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matter to you." His voice cracked suddenly, and he looked away, those shadows sweeping across his face now, like an early dusk. "I'm . . . asking," he said softly.

Not offering to forgive me, just asking. Because he didn't have his yesterdays anymore, and he couldn't touch tomorrow any better than I could. But maybe he didn't have today, either. "I've got some contacts in the towers." I scuffed my feet on the barge planks, shy all of a sudden. "They'll pay good money for vegetables that test clean. Better than the markets."

"Okay." He was staring into the fog, his face all sharp, perfect planes, like the bergs. "That's fine."

His words sounded flat in the fog. And yeah, yesterday doesn't look over my shoulder, and I live in today, but . . . it can still be a pretty empty place. I touched his arm, and he flinched. Just a little. "I'd like to work the barge." The words came out soft, real low. "I'd like it a lot."

He looked at me then, his eyes not so dead. Behind us, somebody shouted. Sounded like orders. Time to leave.

Kay closed his eyes and shuddered. "Always a new world, a clean slate. I need to learn how to live like that." His voice trembled, but he smiled at me. "Let's go, or it won't matter either way." He slipped over the side of the barge into the cold water.

Yeah, I owed him. I crawled in after him. If I'm living on the barge, I'm not going to forget him. Maybe one day I'll figure out what it is that hurts so much inside me; love or hate? Or a little of both? Maybe Kay can tell me. He's got to hate me some, for selling him out.

I won't remember doing that after awhile. But *he* will.

And he'll remember that David's dead, and I won't.

Hey, what *is* memory? A chain to a dead-weight past, or layers of love and hurt and *being?*

I don't know. "We can hide out on my old platform until they're done." I swam on my side, slowly, one arm clamped against my aching side. "When the crew leaves we can go back." Even if they took a week to move all the statues, Kay wouldn't forget the barge.

And maybe that's what he wants from me. Forgetting. . . . Breeze began to shred the fog. Sun glowed through the thinning mist overhead as we swam into the shadow of the piers. I don't know. Maybe love like Kay has for David does need a past. But maybe you can still love—do it over and over, and it's new every time, almond-eyed, like the chapati girl, fresh and . . . wonderful. And maybe that's okay, too, that kind of love. Maybe I can tell Kay that.

We climbed up onto the bow of the old man's boat, down below my platform. And I still couldn't remember if he was a smuggler, or an herbalist, or an ice thief. And it didn't matter. Water sparkled on the rat's

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metal-bead eyes and dripped from his rusty whiskers. It was grinning at me. I grinned back.

"Climb on up," I said to Kay. "There's room. I've got food, and it's not even mussels." So Kay could eat it and me, too.

Hey, today's okay. We can deal with today. We can even deal with tomorrow, when it comes. I picked up the rat this time, and started to climb. Carefully. ●

NEXT ISSUE

We have a very special issue indeed coming up for you next issue, our special November Double-Length issue—which, among other reasons, is special because it's BIG enough to give us room to include an amazing array of novellas, novelettes, and short stories by some of the Biggest Names in the business, as well as by new writers at the beginnings of their careers, plus thought-provoking non-fiction, incisive reviews, poetry, cartoons, letters... everything but a Partridge In A Pear Tree! (Maybe we can fit that in *next* issue.)

First off, multiple Nebula- and Hugo-winner **Ursula K. Le Guin,** one of the most respected and universally acclaimed science fiction writers of the last half of the twentieth century, returns to these pages for the first time in more than a decade, and returns with a major new novella, our monumental November cover story, "Forgiveness Day." Set in the same fictional universe as her award-winning novels *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed,* the star-spanning, Hainish-settled interstellar community known as the Ekumen, this may well be Le Guin's most important Ekumen story *since* those landmark novels—a powerful and compassionate story of the star-crossed relationship of a man and a woman who are literally worlds apart, set against a vividly imagined alien world... a compelling and suspenseful story of clashing cultural values, of politics, violence, religion, terror, and passion, both stark *and* lyrical in a way that has always been Le Guin's trademark. This may well be one of *the* major events in science fiction this year.

But, exciting as that *is,* it's not even *close* to being all that we have in store for you in this immense issue!

ALSO IN NOVEMBER: Nebula- and Hugo-winner **Kate Wilhelm** returns to these pages after too long an absence with a penetrating look into the corners of the human heart we'd rather keep *secret,* in "I Know What You're Thinking"; Nebula- and Hugo-

(continued on page 102)

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THE BLACKERY DARK

Wil McCarthy

Wil McCarthy is an aerospace engineer at Martin Marietta Space Launch Systems in Denver, Colorado. His latest novel, *Agressor Six* (Roc), has just been published, and his next book, *Flies from the Amber*, will be released from Roc next spring. Mr. McCarthy's short stories have appeared in *Aboriginal SF*, *Interzone*, *Grails*, and *Universe 3*. "The Blackery Dark" is his first story for *Asimov's*.

Illustration by Ron Chironna

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Case#: 93-021
Date: March 7, 1993
Loc: Presbyterian St. Luke's, Denver
Att. Phy: B.W. Jablonski, M.D.

Illness is about loss of freedom, loss of dignity. Sometimes, loss of everything. So I learned, when the Epstein-Barr virus drove me out of dental school, out of my home, out of every aspect of the life I'd built for myself. Two years I was sick. Eight changes of season. Five hundred episodes of Johnny Carson. And when my strength finally returned, the life I had built was still gone.

Seeing the patient before me on this dreary March day brings all of it back—long hours and longer days, the merciless hands of Nature wringing the life from unwilling flesh. And, too, the disinfected starch-and-plastic smell I'd all but forgotten. I've stayed away a long time, haven't even *visited* a hospital since John Travolta was considered sexy. But here I am, back in PSL again.

I'm well protected; gown, cap, goggles, and those little stretchy things they put over your shoes. And three pairs of surgical gloves, clinging hotly and stickily to my hands. Still, the appearance of the patient is frightening. Pale skin, face twisted and yet slack, as if worn out with the expressions of agony. Lesions, oozing dark fluid, cover his entire body. Or what I can see of it, at least.

Like an exchange student, I have visited the land of the dying. Courtesy of Epstein-Barr immunosuppression, I toured infection after infection, dwelling in each for a time and then moving on. Lighter times, now, but I know I'll go back to that country some day, and never come home.

I'm in no hurry. Please god don't let him be contagious.

It's too awful. I never should have come here, never *would* have come here, if not for Holt's urgent request. A plea, really, almost hysterical. Cora Holt and I go way back, to the undergraduate days when D.U. taught *her* zoology instead of the other way around. Old friends we are, and close. Not lovers but *intimates,* our relationship solid despite infrequent use, like an old hunting rifle, hanging ready above the fireplace. We'd been long without a mutual crisis, and I'd say we were due, but still she would not have thought of me in a professional capacity if she weren't at the end of her rope.

The patient is a pupil of hers, and dying quickly. Some sort of mycosis, the doctor says. Very, very serious, but they can't treat it unless they find out what it is, and the patient is unable to produce a coherent story. Holt's fault, somehow. She sent this young man out, into the field.

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Looking for fungus? I miss part of the explanation, it is not clear. I don't want to be here.

"But you *must,*" Holt had said. "I don't know what to *do.* The doctors, none of us. *Please,* Rick, give the boy a chance at least. We've tried everything else."

And there, of course, is the rub. I learned hypnosis my second year at dental, as an anaesthesia technique for minor drilling. Not always effective, but so much *safer* than gas or injections. One trick, sure, in a bag filled to bursting. But in later years it was all I had left, the only way I could get off the dole and pay my own damn rent. It's not a bad living, as such things go. I even have a full-page ad in the Yellow Pages: Rick Towley, Hypnotist.

I cure insomnia, bad habits, a hundred different things, but still I'm a quack, a witch doctor, dismissed by the mainstream of society as if I were hawking crystals and pyramid power. Fleecing the public, right, sure. That's why you can still find me on East Colfax with the hookers and the drunks.

The fact is, I deal, quite cheaply, in broken spirits. People come to me only when they've run out of hope. Like Cora. And like Cora, they expect me to wallow uncomplaining in misery that is not my own. And most times, that's exactly what I do.

Today, though . . . the patient's oozing sores are connected by lines, just visible beneath the skin. "Mycotic infection following the lymph channels," the doctor says. "A great many fungal organisms could form an attack like this, but slowly. This stuff seems to be *thriving* inside him. Possibly it's something we've never seen. If we can't find out for sure . . . "

He shakes his head, face blank behind the cap and mask and goggles. His tone suggests that "we" are wasting our time, that we're just acting out the obligatory shuffles and glides of the Hospital Death ritual. He disapproves of me, no surprise, but he'll let me risk my life.

"I hate you, Holt," I say to my dear old friend, and I mean it. But I step forward, and sit down in the chair they pull out for me.

Questioning begins with name and birthdate, and with a little coaxing the patient is able to produce these. Address is not so easy, and Holt informs me the young man has been traveling for several months in the South Pacific and is only just returned.

"Blackery Island!" The patient shouts, in a manner that suggests I should have heard of it, which I haven't.

I ask where the island is located, why and for how long he was there. Holt attempts to answer but I stop her. The information is not so important as its source.

Responses of the patient are not comprehensible. I catch the word

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"virgins," and something that sounds like "God of Darkness." I nod, as if understanding. Relief is clearly visible in the patient's eyes. He continues to speak.

Bringing out the Mesmer coin, black and silver to draw the eye, I look to Holt and Jablonski for confirmation. They nod. I begin.

The lighting in here is good, and reflections from the coin place the patient very quickly in what appears to be a normal trance. I ask if he can hear me.

"Certainly," he replies, in a clear and lucid voice.

The doctor and the doctor are obviously impressed. I wave them back, irritated. The oohs and ahs of the crowd, the parlor magician has done a trick!

"Tell me about the island," I say to the patient, my voice friendly and reasonable.

The young man's body jerks, tenses. "The island is the home of the Dark God," he says. His eyes begin to shift, a bad sign.

I try a different approach. "What is your occupation?"

"Myxomycologist," he says, a little calmer.

"Yes? What does that mean?"

"Slime!" He tenses again. "I study slime molds. Motile cellular colonies, you know? They migrate until they find the proper conditions. The proper conditions! Oh God, if I had known!"

Retreat, redirect, reassure. My mantra. I almost lay a hand on his arm, stop myself in time. Lord! It is like a squash left too long on the vine, eaten from within by squirming things. Do not let him be contagious.

"Are you paid well for your efforts?"

"No," the patient says.

"Do you enjoy the work?

He breathes deeply, slowly. Good. "The library portions of my work I do not enjoy. Holt is such a stickler for taxonomy, you know, as if we actually *knew* the myxomycotic evolutionary histories. Fungus my ass, they are protozoans. Symbionts, even. Oh God, symbionts!"

"You are a field man," I say, cautiously, moving by feel. "Notebook in hand? Dirt beneath your fingernails?"

"My notebook!" He screams. Eyes widen, searching. He is fighting his way out of the trance. "I lost my notebook!"

"No." This time, Lord help me, I *do* grip his arm. It is hot and soft beneath my fingers. "No, it isn't lost. Relax. Professor Holt has got it back at her office. Right?"

I cast a meaningful glance in Holt's direction.

"Yes," Holt says quietly. Beneath the clear domes of the goggles, her eyes are a sleepless red. She has reached and passed the limit of her ability to cope. I know that she will go along with anything I say.

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She whispers briefly in my ear.

The patient was found capering nude on the west beach of the island, screaming and crying. Already the infection had impaired his ability to communicate, so that his rescuers could not learn in detail what had befallen him. His research equipment was never recovered. No lab gear, no camera, no notebook.

I nod, and wave Holt back.

"Your illness is very serious," I say to the patient. Perhaps this will help focus his attention.

"I know," the patient replies. "In fact, it's much worse than you think."

"Really. In what way?"

The patient trembles, as if in anger. "Paramour of the virgins," he says. "All of them, every one of them. If you were a jealous husband, what would *you* think? Lono tried to tell me, but even *he* was groping blindly along knotted chains of oral tradition. If not for the salt problem, we'd every one of us be dead."

Ah hah. Under hypnosis, the patient is producing clearer and calmer gibberish. What horrors are happening unseen within his skull? I imagine a slimy fungus, clenching like a fist upon the soft matter of his brain. I imagine worse even than that.

Retreat, redirect, reassure.

"Can you describe your notebook?" I ask him.

"Yes," he says. "The cover is orange-brown, like a manila envelope only made of plastic. Wire-bound at the top, with white, waterproof pages. My pen is tied to it with a piece of string. My name is written across the front, very neatly. Somebody else did that for me. Valerie, I think. My actual handwriting is not so good."

"I understand," I say. An inspiration hits me. "If you were to open the cover of the notebook, could you read what was written inside?"

"Of course," he says. He clears his throat, rather theatrically it seems to me, and launches into his first clear account of the events at Blackery Island.

* * *

Day 1: Evil Spirits. That's practically all Lono could talk about after we landed. He helped unload my gear but refused to leave the beach, refused to get more than fifty feet from the plane. He kept fingering that necklace of his, and singing those quick, one-breath songs. "You're an educated man," I tried to protest, but he simply nodded. Education and evil spirits are not connected subjects for him, the one having nothing to do with the other. Soon, he was knee deep in the surf, pushing the plane back out and turning it. "Careful, careful," was the last thing he said to me before starting the engine and flying away. Such a fantastically weird guy. I could do a whole chapter on him.

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It's beautiful here. Should I have mentioned that first? A truly unspoiled paradise, Blackery has been *looked* at fewer times than Tonga has been bought and sold. Pure white beaches, jungles that have never seen an axe or machete, and the volcano juts up like a gray fist from the trees. Less than ten miles across, this island is *really* far out, closer to Pitcairn than to anywhere else, and Pitcairn is three hours by plane. I've seen every version of *Mutiny on the Bounty*, and read most of the book. Strange to think it really happened. Strange to think Bligh passed right by here on his search, with hardly a word for this beautiful place.

Culpepper stopped here briefly, though his harpooners warned him not to. Evil spirits again. During the stop two men fled into the jungle and could not be found. Nothing unusual there; desertion was a major risk in those days, life at sea being what it was. But the crew was unsettled, and the ship departed soon afterward. Still, it seems they did get a good look around, and they recorded some of the things they saw. In a journal, one of Culpepper's men describes "a kind of forest slug, which turned into mushrooms when strucke by the sun." Or so the crew of another ship reported, after the *New Bedford* went down with all hands on its way past Cape Horn. Another risk of the age.

To the myxomycologist in me, that "slug" sounded like a stack of cover articles and a nice cushy job somewhere. Unfortunately, it sounded so to Holt as well. My idea, but her grant money, ergo her name before mine on the journal covers. Academia and myxomycota could learn a lot from each other.

My camp is in a small clearing, just inside the treeline. Out of the wind, but not quite out of the sun. I suppose I should finish setting up before said sun moves down into the foliage. Then there is dinner to think about. More later.

Day 2: I fell asleep by the fire last night, lulled by soft breezes and the sound of strange birds. Early start today, though the sand fleas have been using me as a snack bar. The hammock or the tent from now on; one never knows what's crawling in the night.

But I did get an early start today, and did quite a lot of tromping around in the jungle around my camp. No slime molds, unfortunately, no "forest slugs." But there are dragonflies here, really huge ones, with wingspans larger than my fingers can spread. I thought such beasties were long extinct, but then Holt never did make a real zoologist of me, and particularly not an entomologist. The trees, also, are worthy of note; I've seen several species of gymnosperm I do not recognize. Again, I'm no expert, but the words "living fossil" jump out at me when I look around. Here and there in the island ecologies of the South Pacific are old, old plants that have gone tits-up in the rest of the world. Climates

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don't change much, here, and competition is light. I'll look into this when I get back.

The birds I heard last night may have been parrots. I saw some today, flapping about in the trees. Not many, though, not nearly as many as I'd expected. Generally, on islands this size, birds of a particular species are either totally absent or else omnipresent. The consequence of predator-free isolation.

This place is as strange and wonderful as any I've heard of. When Lono comes back I may tell him to leave without me!

Day 3: Still no myxomycota, but I believe I saw a *tuatara* up on a tree limb today! So far from New Zealand. Could I be mistaken? But no, I'm certain I saw the pineal receptor in the animal's forehead. Virtually unchanged since the days of the earliest reptiles, the tuatara is a lizard which retains the light-sensing, metabolism-regulating "third eye" of the early reptiles. But it's *really* endangered, found only on New Zealand and a dozen or so nearby islands. Three thousand miles from here, even the closest of them. I *must* be wrong, and yet . . .

The creature disappeared into foliage before I could get a really close look. I will keep my eyes open!

Found a path in the forest today, which is also strange. A foot wide and two hundred long, it led from nothing to nowhere. That's not so weird, I guess; large animals can surprise you, sometimes, with their ability to melt into the greenery without evidence of their passage. But a large animal did make this trail, something at least four or five times the mass of a tuatara. A pig? It seems unlikely, but there is much of the unlikely on this island. Again, I'll be looking.

Spam for dinner tonight, while the sun sets over the water. Saturated fat never tasted so good.

Day 4: Okay, slime molds or no I have found something to write home about. I found two lizards, mating on the jungle floor. Pineal receptors were clearly visible atop their heads, and the frills and coloration looked familiar. I pulled them apart and examined them eagerly. Definitely tuatara, so I am to be famous in any case. But . . . how do I write this? Both lizards were female.

Yes, yes, it must be a mistake, but I know a little about these things. I spent a summer as a chicken sexer on an AgGen factory farm, learning to find the "male prominence" in the cloaca. Tuatara are not chickens, but the basic anatomy is not so different. No prominence in either animal. Does this undercut my credibility? Lesbianism does exist in the animal kingdom, and is not as rare as some might like to believe. I released the lizards and watched them slink back into the undergrowth.

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But what a day! Not half an hour later, I heard a strange birdcall, similar to the ones I've been hearing at night. Tracking it to its source, I came upon a turkey-sized bird in a small clearing. It panicked on seeing me, and flapped away, flightlessly. Its tiny, stubby wings took it a foot or two off the ground, no more, and even then it was more an awkward hopping than a real attempt at flight. Like a turkey, or a fat chicken. But in profile the animal looked more like a pheasant. No, like . . . I don't know what. It will come to me.

How does a flightless bird arrive at an island so remote? It is brought by people, or it arrives, against all odds, on a raft of vegetation.

Or it flapped here long ago and found, in isolation, no further reason to fly? I don't know. I better get some sleep.

Day 5: Okay, somebody is messing with my mind. I caught one of the turkey-pheasants today, and put it in a wire enclosure beside my tent. On mother's grave, it looks to me like an archaeopteryx. A hundred million years gone, yes, I know. Could there be a modern species that resembles it so closely?

More tuatara in the jungle today. I'm afraid I've stumbled into some kind of garden or game preserve for severely endangered species. Could one of the radical environmental groups be involved? Something more sinister than that? And if there are zookeepers, what do they think of my presence here? Will they show themselves soon? I feel I am being watched.

Day 6: The turkey-pheasant has laid a clutch of eggs, tan-speckled white. They look like any Grade B's you'd find in the grocery store. Selective breeding, then, returning modern fowl to their primitive roots?

I found another path in the woods today, and depressions on the beach that might be days-old human footprints.

This joke is not funny. They must know I'm here, and yet they hide in the forest like evil spirits. What exactly do they intend?

Day 7: Started off on a bad foot today, hair-triggered, on the lookout for boogey-men. Bird had me up half the night with its cluckings and hootings, and the jungle seethed with movement real or imagined. The night seemed full of eyes. But I'm still a scientist, and unless somebody tells me differently, I'm stuck here until Lono gets back. Asserting my better judgment against unreasoning fear, I set out this morning on my daily trek through the forest.

The tuatara here are a unique species, I know that now. Manipulated? Perhaps. In a bowl-shaped nest of gnarled roots, I found a large female caring for her young. Sheltering them with her body, cleaning their

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cloacas with her tongue. This is not expected behavior in a cold-blooded species! The scene was touching, in a way, but when the mother turned her gaze on me I had to supress a superstitious shudder. There was nothing of love in those cold, lizard eyes.

She snapped at me toothlessly when I pulled her out of the nest, and hissed as I fondled her six children. They were small and healthy and not happy to be examined, and they were female, every last one. I've worked out the odds on this: 98.4 percent against. Perhaps, like any good mother, she devoured her male children. Did I truly think Blackery Island a beautiful place?

But enough of this—I've had a measure of success today. Near the lizard nest was a trail of slime on the forest floor. The spoor of Culpepper's slug? If so, it is quite large for a mollusk; the trail is eight inches wide! I took samples and returned quickly to camp with them, but the view under the microscope showed little. This was residue only, no cellular component. Mucus? Ctyoplasm? Something else? I really can't tell. I wish I had a proper laboratory here.

The light is failing, and despite my excitement I am pretty tired. More tomorrow, I hope.

Day 8: Another piece of the puzzle. I've made some trails of my own by now, and on one of them today I spotted a dark shape, apparently bipedal. As animals so often do, it vanished before I really got a look, but it seemed to be a large monkey of some sort. This explains a lot. I've been over a good fraction of this island, and seen no firm signs of human habitation. No smoke, no buildings, no footprints that could not belong to a monkey.

How did monkeys get here? I don't know. How did any of the animals get here? I'm slowly abandoning my "garden" hypothesis, but still I feel I'm being hoaxed in some way. I use the term loosely, of course. The environment, contrived though it may be in its origins, is undeniably real, and most likely still worthy of study.

At any rate, unless the hoax dates back to Culpepper's voyage, my actual goals here are unaffected. Unless, ugh, an unpleasant thought just occurred to me. My third-hand records on Culpepper date back to the 1920s, no further. His existence is certain, but I have no real proof he was ever here. Oh my. If not for the slime trail I would be pretty discouraged.

The turkey-pheasant likes creamed corn, by the way. Its eggs are doing very well.

Day 9: A full day's tracking. More animal trails (monkey trails?) deeper in the jungle, and two short slime trails. Nothing seemed to lead

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to anything, but late in the afternoon I was up near the volcano and spotted some caves. They were half an hour's hike away, at the very least, and time was moving on, so I reluctantly turned back. A good thing I did, too, because I got lost for a while in the jungle and didn't make it back to camp until right before sundown.

You wouldn't think getting lost would be a risk on an island this small, but damn if this isn't some thick jungle. My machete has lost its factory edge and seems to need sharpening every evening. Sometimes I think I could be walking ten feet from the most beautiful slime molds in the world, and never see them. Soon, though; the trail is getting warmer.

Day 10: Thank God these pages, and my watch, are waterproof. I'm huddled in the tent right now, writing by the light of the candle lantern. I'd use the gas one, but I can't find it! The rain has been unbelievable, buckets' worth hammering down all day. It's floated my gear all over the place, covered everything with wet, muddy sand. I hate it. Even the sound of the rain, a steady freight-train rumble, is enough to drive you nuts.

And the wind! Sandblasting grit at everything, tearing fronds off the trees. Sometimes the rain tastes of salt, as if it were ocean water torn horizontally from the wavetops and dashed in my face. The tent would have blown away long ago if I weren't inside it, and even now the poles are bending under the strain. If they pop out of their sockets I will be miserable indeed. There was no warning of this at all. It was clear when I went to bed last night.

Good Lord! I've just had a look outside, and the ocean is practically at my doorstep! At high tide the beach is nearly a hundred feet wide, but the storm surge has eaten half that distance already and seems to be inching closer! Out deep the waves are ten feet high, looking dangerous. I may have to move the camp. How, I can't imagine.

Okay, a little better now. The ocean is moving back. God, it's late. I'm going to put the light out.

Day 11: Still raining, not so hard but still it's keeping me in the tent. Nothing to do, nothing to do. I should have brought a waterproof deck of cards.

Ho. The rain broke at midday, and the sky cleared within the hour like it was trying to play innocent on me. Camp was a ruin. I spent all afternoon cleaning up. Some things were hopelessly smashed, some lost altogether. The food is almost completely ruined.

Curiously, the turkey-pheasant is still clucking about, though her wire

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pen was quite thoroughly destroyed. The eggs, too. Little pink embryos are scattered all over the place. I put them under the microscope. Normal embryos, I think, like those of any other bird. No manufacturer's serial number, nothing at all unusual except . . . it's a bit early to say, but none of them seems to be male. *Nothing* on this island seems to be male, except for me. A short time ago, that would have sounded like paradise.

Day 12: Late start today. I spent a ridiculous amount of time trying to husk a coconut, and a shorter but still lengthy period trying to crack the shell without spilling too much of the milk. Hell of a breakfast. Burned more calories than I got, I'm quite sure, and in any case *I hate coconuts!* I've got to find some fruit or something, else I'll starve.

Once again I hiked up toward the caves, but I got sidetracked. Another monkey was out in the jungle. It ran off when it saw me, but I ran after it, foolishly. Didn't catch it, of course, and I got myself pretty well lost. The sun was at its zenith, no help, and the trees were too thick for me to see the volcano. By the time I got anywhere near the caves it was getting late again, and I decided to cut my losses and head back.

Not a total loss, I suppose. I did learn that the monkey is not much of a climber or brachiator. When it saw me, after all, it fled horizontally, rather than vertically, into the jungle. It was hunched over when I first glimpsed it, but it stood quickly and ran quickly. On its hind legs? Probably not, but it sort of looked that way. One of these days I'll get a better look.

Day 13: Moving day. I can't keep hacking and slogging through five miles of jungle and back, *and* foraging for edibles, *and* looking for monkeys and lizards and slime molds, and still keep my sanity. There aren't enough hours in a day. I knew of a clearing in the forest, about halfway up toward the volcano. The place I'd first captured the turkey-pheasant, in fact. A little sun, a little shade, a little fresh water spring. Not bad.

I moved the camp up there today. And I brought the turkey-pheasant with me and penned her up again. She wasn't too happy about that, let me tell you, but I'm waiting for her next clutch of eggs to save me from a starvation/coconut diet. If I get hungry enough I may even eat *her,* though I admit I'd feel bad about it.

The sun's gone down, now, and by lamplight the clearing is not such a paradise. The jungle looms over it. I hadn't really thought, earlier. I'm not as frightened of the jungle as I was last week, but I am surrounded by it now, miles of it in every direction. No moon, a haze across the stars, it is dark. And the noises are different, and louder. No gentle hiss of waves across the sand, but I can hear the wind moaning across the mouth of the volcano, across the caves and fissures on its slopes. And

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the chattering, too, of animals I haven't heard before, the nocturnal denizens of the deep jungle.

And so, uneasily, to bed.

Day 14: More rain this morning! Damn! It seems to be clearing up now, but it will keep me from the caves again. There, yes, it's stopping. Time to rustle up some coconuts.

Well, I've spent the day sketching plants. Very boring, but the weather's been iffy and I didn't want to get too far from camp. Of course, a day can't pass here without an odd occurrence. Here it is: The turkey-pheasant laid a couple of eggs while I was gone, what would have been my dinner, but when I cracked one of them into the pan I discovered it was fertile! Little specks of red all through it, and a tiny embryo attached to the yolk sac. I'm not quite that hungry, so I dumped the pan into the fire and washed it in the little spring.

But fertile eggs? The bird's been penned up or under my supervision for most of the last nine days. If she's had any amorous visitors, I've certainly seen no evidence of it.

Day 15: Caught a dragonfly today, and a tuatara, and killed and dissected them. Both were female. Both were pregnant. Something is *very* peculiar here. I've not seen a single male animal since my arrival. Chances of this are something less than one in a million.

Parthenogenesis? So-called "virgin birth" can be found sometimes in insects, more rarely in birds and reptiles. It is most common when a species is geographically isolated, with a small or nonexistent male population. The females give birth to natural "clones" of themselves, but in every such case an environmental stimulus is required to induce haploid division, to cause the chromosomes to double in the course of meiosis. In the laboratory, prodding of the egg cell with a needle is sometimes sufficient. In nature, mechanisms are more obscure but involve hormonal imbalance triggered externally. Like an allergic reaction, almost.

I am not a biochemist! I don't know enough about these things, but I have a hard time imagining an irritant capable of inducing parthenogenic pregnancy in three distinct species, in two goddamn unrelated phyla! Something is

I'm back now. The island is peopled after all! I saw another of my "monkeys" crouching at the edge of the jungle, watching me while I worked. I started toward it and discovered, to my astonishment, that it was a *human female,* naked and black-skinned. Short and extremely ugly, with a weak chin and heavy, beetled brow. No forehead to speak

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of. And her skin was *black*, not brown but literally the color of coal tar. Not Australoid, no, let me not give that impression. Not Micronesian either, certainly not that. More like a Pygmy on bad steroids. Not someone you'd expect to see this side of French Polynesia!

She carried a short bamboo stake in her hand, the sort of thing a skilled person might use to pry open coconut husks. As I came at her she snarled, not afraid of me but angry, furious, as if my presence here were a great insult to her, and she raised the stake, brandishing it in a threatening manner, then turned and vanished into the jungle.

I followed, calling out for her to stop. Useless. She had gone, quickly and quietly, leaving only the ghosts of a trail, and those for a few yards only.

Back at camp now, and for once I am not hungry. How many are in this woman's tribe? Are they all aware of me, do they all feel this hostility toward me? If I sleep at all tonight, it will be with the machete in my hand.

Good Lord. Under laboratory conditions, parthenogenesis can sometimes be induced in mammals. Good Lord. It's a foolish thought, it's a goddamn *stupid* thought, but . . . a tribe of women, of identical twin sisters, born like bees from a virgin queen? Have they ever even *seen* a man?

I can see I've lost my objectivity. Bad scientist! Bad! But it's dark out, and I wish to hell I hadn't come here alone.

Day 16: Long day, my Lord I can hardly hold the pen my hand is shaking. Discipline! From the beginning, then.

Sleepless night, no surprise, but I got an early start and headed up for the caves. Machete clutched tightly in my fist, oh yes. Wanting to be friendly, but not stupid, not dogmeat. They haunted me all the way up, making noises, showing themselves on the trail ahead of me and behind and then vanishing before I could approach. So much bolder than they had been!

The climb was more treacherous than I'd expected. Volcanic rocks, sharp! I slipped several times. I cut my hand, and then I dropped the machete and watched it bounce and slide back down the hillside I'd troubled so hard to climb. Nothing there when I got back down. Like it had vanished, like they'd taken it from under my nose, in broad daylight! Defenseless, I climbed up the volcano's slope again.

I am successful, did I mention that? The journal covers can go to hell, this is . . . not like I expected. There were "mushrooms" at the cave mouth, the fruiting bodies of a large and prolific slime mold. No food supply, growing on the bare rock! Dark purple in color, with darker veins running just under the surface, they throbbed and pulsed at the edge of

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the cave shadows. A bit oversized, but they looked like phalluses. Phalli? Whatever, the mountain was sporting a hundred restless hard-on's. I took a sample, shoved it into a container from my pack. It withered in my hand, its ardor deflated.

The caves, lava tubes I suppose, are not deep. Fifteen feet, no more, but near the back in the deeper gloom, I found bits of Culpepper's slug. Myxomycota, I have never seen such a mold! It ran away from me, actually tried to escape as I held the lantern up to it! A few inches a day, sometimes a few feet, that is the speed of slime. Not inches per second! Not visible speed, like worms squidging over the rocks in a tangled, panicky mass!

Okay. Objectivity. Okay. No plasmodia, not in the usual sense. The slugs were thumb-sized, translucent, filled with tiny blobs like actual differentiated organs. And yet, the creatures were clearly mycotic in origin, neither animal nor plant but fucking *fungus,* fucking *ooze.* I got one into a sample jar but I was careful not to touch it. Unclean. Uncool.

The light from the cave mouth dimmed, I looked up. Human figures blocked my way, the ugly silhouettes of identically ugly women. What can I say? I screamed. Fear, I suppose, but anger also, a basic animal screech from deep inside. It was not, somehow, what they were expecting. They fell away, and I ran right through them and down the slope. Not quite so treacherous at breakneck speed, I found. Keep your boots on the top of the rocks, spine perpendicular to the slope just like you were skiing, and run like murder as hard as you can.

I got back to camp. More to say? Not really. They followed, but a little more cautiously now.

The slug had fallen apart in my sample jar, turned to a little puddle of gel at the bottom. Using instruments, careful about touching, I got some of it onto a slide and put it under the microscope. It was . . . remembering it makes me want to gag. I've seen the amoebic slime molds, and the rod-shaped myxobacteria, and the acellular plasmodia with ten thousand nuclei floating free in the cytoplasm. I've seen things weirder than that, things that cast our whole taxonomic hierarchy into doubt. But this . . .

The mold was cellular, individual organisms in a stew of secreted plasma. Black, nearly opaque, and with long, thick flagella that thrashed eagerly. Not like tadpoles, really. Not even protozoa. On my honor, they looked like sperm.

Not a reliable witness, our young scientist, and you're right to say so! A glimpse, that was all I got. I turned the mirror, trying to catch a little more light, trying to really *see* the twitching things down there on the slide. But when the reflected sunlight caught them, the "sperm" puffed up instantly, like rice in a steamer. Little cellulose threads sprang up

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between them, weaving into mats, walls, tubules. I pulled my eye away from the lens, looked down at what was actually happening on the slide. The gel was gone, replaced by a purple disk that was rapidly unflattening into a stalk. In moments I had a perfect little fruiting body sitting there, millimeters high, like Tom Thumb's penis, engorged and throbbing.

The jungle surrounding my camp was swaying in the breeze, the gentle island breeze. Sunlight danced in little pools, and one of them had brushed across my sample jar. As I watched, another fruiting body came erect, this one four inches high. Six. Eight.

Obscene. Fungi do not grow this quickly. You can sometimes hear them growing, sometimes even *see* them growing. Fast, yes, but *not this fast!* I did things, scientific things. Took measurements, made drawings. But I was just going through the motions, not thinking, not believing. This isn't real, it can't be real. The animals, the cave women, the fungus that is not. All part of a nonsense pattern, like something from the back brain of Hieronymus Bosch. Will it help to say that things like this, in simple terms, do not ever, ever occur?

The sun is down, now. I've got my lanterns up, trying to hold the darkness at bay, but it's a losing battle. I can hear the women out there, bashing through the underbush, no further pretense at stealth.

Oh, this is new! The fruiting body in the sample jar had stopped throbbing, started swelling and stretching instead. Now it's just burst, releasing a dark cloud of spores. The little phallus on the microscope slide seems to be—yes, there it goes too. A day/night cycle, then. Scatter at dusk, bear fruit in the morning. All those fruiting bodies up on the volcano, are they bursting now, as well?

I am downwind from them.

This can't be right. This can't be real. Slime is forming in little blobs on the vegetation around me. Growing quickly, growing *visibly,* withering the plants where it touches. It is starting to move.

That's it. I'm in over my head. Should have listened to Lono, I've lost my machete but I've still got a hatchet. Also my lantern I'm going to the *beach* I want to see them *coming* I can't *see* in this

* * *

"Is that where the journal ends?" I say to the patient when the silence has gone on long enough.

"Yes," he says.

I look back at Holt, and she looks at me, and Doctor Jablonski looks at the both of us. The parlor magician has done his trick too well, has shocked even himself. This outpouring is . . . beyond anything I've encountered before. I turn back to the patient, who has become very tense in the course of his speech.

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"Relax," I say. "You will not re-experience the *fear* of these events, all right?"

The patient loosens up a little. Red-black fluid leaks from one of the sores on his arm, staining the sheet. God, he looks awful. "All right," he says.

"Can you tell me what happened next?"

"Yes. The women chased me in the darkness. Tree limbs beat at my face and body. I lost the lantern, but I didn't dare stop."

"Did you get to the beach?"

"Yes, I did. The moon was out, a little thin crescent of it. Not much to see by, but it was better than the total darkness. The women came, they formed a half-circle around me a hundred feet away, and then . . . "

"Yes?"

The patient shakes his head, a frustrated expression crossing his face. He says nothing.

"Tell me," I prod.

"There aren't words."

"Try."

The patient's face darkens further. "There aren't words, really! The God of Darkness, the God of Night! He . . . gathered himself up from his scattered fragments. All of Culpepper's little slugs, a hundred of them, a thousand. Yes! Of them He became complete!"

Wonderful. Without the journal to focus on, the patient is as incoherent as ever. Very well then. Retreat, redirect, reassure.

"This God," I say. "What did he look like?"

"Oh," says the patient, *"That's* an interesting question!"

"You didn't get a good look?"

"I did. I got an exceedingly good look."

"What was its shape?"

"Its shape? Its shape? It was taller than me, I can tell you that. Maybe seven or eight feet."

"Relax."

"The God embraced me," says the patient. "He partook. But the ocean water threw Him off! The salinity of blood doesn't bother Him, He is happy to drink of his wives, happy to enter and partake of them. But *think!* He is a cellular aggregate. Those spermatozoa, wriggling in their millions, protected only by a cytoplasmic suspension. No skin! The ocean will dissolve Him, else He'd rule the entire world!"

"You got away, then?" I say.

"Yes! A struggle toward the water. The waves broke and He was off me. I got away!"

I pause. "It was ten days later that Lono returned with the plane? What did you do until then?"

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The patient giggles, a horrible sound the like of which I've never heard. "One never gets far on an island the size of Blackery. The God holds court, and we are all the vessels of His sacrament. You can't escape, not really."

He giggles again. Polluted blood runs freely from a dozen sores.

"I don't think we'll get much more," I say to Cora Holt.

"Every plant, every animal," says the patient in a clear but urgent voice, "is wedded to the God. He is the parthenogenic irritant, inducing them to bear offspring genetically identical to themselves. Do you see? Evolution virtually stops. Everything that washes up on his shores is his forever."

He looks at me, with a kind of hopeless desperation. The silence is heavy.

"I understand," I say, because that is clearly what he wants me to say. He's had that message bottled up inside, I think, has tried and tried to communicate it to someone. And I am right; when I've spoken he relaxes visibly. Relaxes further, and further again, and suddenly he is unconscious.

His mad, mad tale is told. He is right, it cannot be true. The infection has ruined his mind, poisoned his memories.

My hands begin to shake. My chair groans against the floor as I push it back, as I stand up. Holt's hand is on my shoulder, then, as if to steady me. I shrug her off and step away.

"The shift nurse can walk you through the decontamination procedure," says Doctor Jablonski, as I retreat. "Don't just pull things off at random, remember. You don't want to risk this infection."

Indeed I do not. I continue to back away. Too much sickness here. I imagine Jablonski's skin, a mass of oozing sores beneath the gown and masks.

"Thanks, I'll call you," Holt says to me, and I nod. Her body seems to ripple within its clothing.

"It's hard to make much sense out of that story," Jablonski is saying, now, to Holt. "The salt angle is interesting, though. We can *try* elevating chloride levels, though I warn you it's liable to be almost as dangerous to the patient as it is to the mycosis. . . . "

I turn and flee unabashedly. Hi-yo silver, my work here is finished.

Post Scriptum: Holt does call me, as per her promise, though it comes a full week after my visit to the hospital. The young man died, it seems, and was afterward packed in an airtight coffin along with his bed linens and two hundred pounds of driveway salt. And then cremated.

Holt is a dear friend, and I suppose I'll forgive her some day. But she's a damn fool, three times the fool I ever thought. She is heading for

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Blackery, "to discover what really happened there. We'll take precautions, of course, but really it's the least I can do."

I picture her in my mind. The face I have known so long, twisted in agony. The body, no youthful blossom but serviceable nonetheless, sprawled on the floor of a cave, watched over by small, brutish shadows while the Dark God . . . partakes.

I do not share this image with her. She would laugh, and think less of me for voicing such petty superstition. She, who has never visited the land of the dying.

"Be careful," I say instead, and, with shaking hand, place the phone back in its cradle.

Perversely, my fear is not that I won't see her again, but that I *will*. Balanced on the knife-edge of dilemma, unsure which way to fall. On which side lies madness? For if I know Cora at all, I know that she'll be back, that she'll ring my bell one day and stand there smiling, a great wooden horse at my gates. ●

(continued from page 83)

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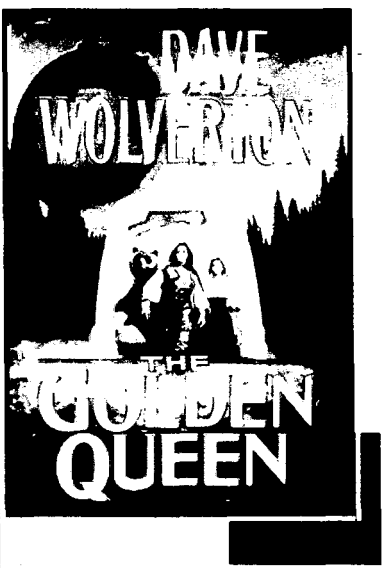

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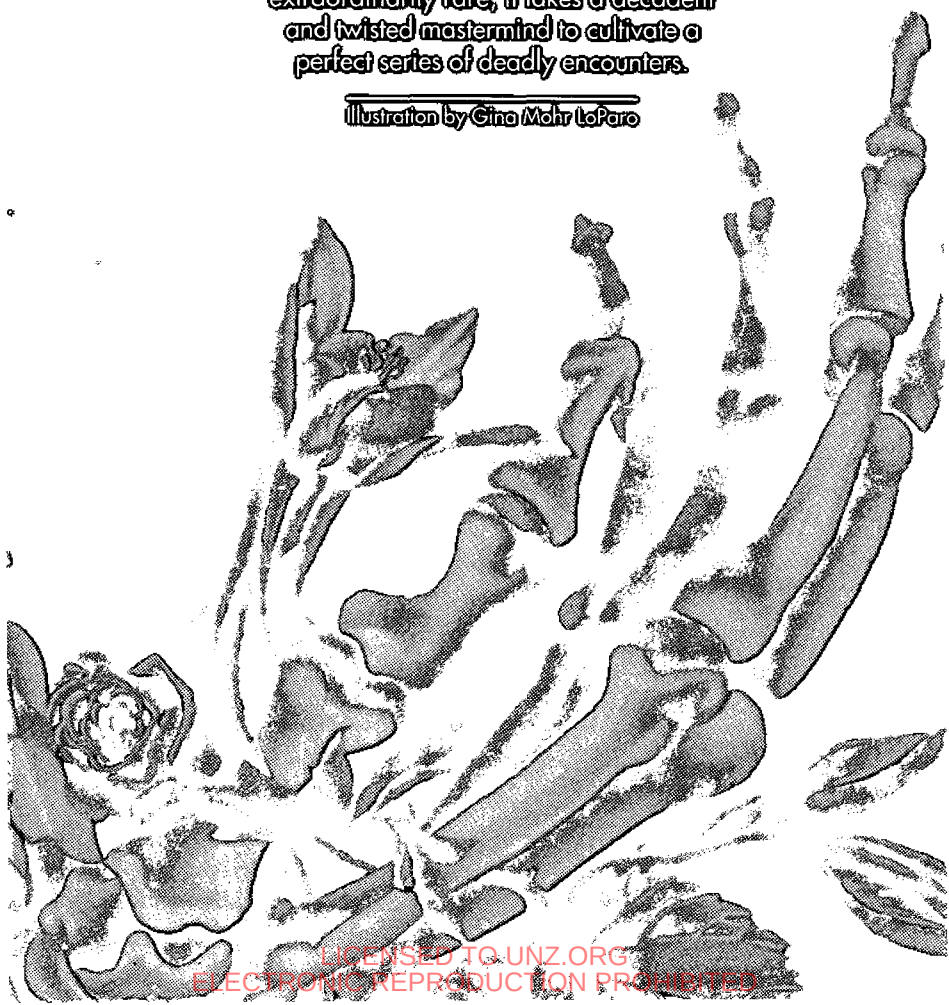
Brian Stableford

LES FLEURS DU MAL

In a future where premeditated murder is extraordinarily rare, it takes a decadent and twisted mastermind to cultivate a perfect series of deadly encounters.

Illustration by Gina Mohr LoParo



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Oscar stood before the full-length mirror, carefully inspecting every detail of his face. He caressed the flawless flesh with sensitive fingertips, rejoicing in its gloss. "Ivory and rose-leaves," he murmured.

Oscar always addressed his own reflection in the most admiring terms while it remained full of youth. When it grew old, as it had three times before, it lost its capacity to inspire admiration, and became a mocking reminder of the hazards that he and all men of his era still faced: decay, senescence, decomposition.

His revitalized hair was a glossy chestnut brown. To describe his complexion in terms of ivory and rose-leaves was a trifle hyperbolic, but the skin was pale and even. Authentically young men never had skin as perfect as that, because they could not help accumulating petty flaws while growing to maturity; only the rejuvenated could attain perfection, thanks to the artistry of their cosmetic engineers.

It was a nice paradox, Oscar thought, that only those who had been old could look *truly* young. He had flown in the face of professional advice by attempting a third rejuvenation so soon, at the age of 133. Many older men than he had not yet undergone their second rejuvenation, refusing to risk deep somatic engineering while their bodies had not quite descended to the depths of decrepitude. Oscar was far less brave than they; his fear of personal dilapidation was pathological.

"It is only shallow people," he informed his reflection, confident in the knowledge that he had an appreciative audience, "who do not judge by appearances." He bathed in the luxury of his own narcissism, admiring his grey eyes, his soft lips, his pearly white teeth.

He reached out to pluck a green carnation from the wall beside the mirror. He twirled it between his delicate fingers, admiring it with as much satisfaction as he admired his own image. The flower was his own creation. It was a joke, of course, but a serious joke. The games which Oscar played in consequence of his name—which had been given to him in all innocence by parents whose knowledge of the earlier Oscar Wilde was limited to a vague awareness that he had been a writer of note—were no mere matter of public relations. His identification with the ideas and ideals of his *alter ego* had long ago become a kind of fetish. He was not afraid to acknowledge that fact, nor to take pride in it. Life, if it were to be lived to the full in modern conditions, required a definite style and aesthetic shape: a constant flow of delicate ironies, tensions, and innovations.

He placed the flower in the buttonhole of his neatly tailored suit.

Furnishing hotel interiors was vulgar hackwork unbefitting a real artist, but a real artist had to make a living, and the commonplaceness of such commissions was offset by such flourishes of unorthodoxy as having it written into every contract that one suite of rooms should be fitted with green carnations instead of the more fashionable roses and amaranths. His clients did not mind his making such demands; they

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were, after all, paying for his fashionability as well as his technical dexterity, and he could not have been nearly so fashionable were it not for his extravagantly extrovert eccentricity.

He turned one way and then the other, shrugging his shoulders to make sure that his jacket hung perfectly upon his remodeled body.

Oscar did not doubt for a moment, as his greedy eyes devoured the glory of his reflection, that he would be equal to the challenge of his third youth. He was no crass businessman, apt to fall back into the same old routines at the first opportunity, wearing a new face as if it were merely a mask laid over the old. Nor was he the kind of man who would go to the opposite extreme, reverting to the habits and follies of first youthfulness, playing the sportsman or the rake. He was an *artist*. Artists had always been the pioneers who led mankind into the psychological unknown, and the current technology of rejuvenation was, after all, little more than a century old. No one knew for sure how many times a man might be successfully restored to youth, although it was tragically obvious that many failed at the second or third attempt. Oscar was firmly resolved that if the only thing required to secure eternal life was the correct attitude of mind, then he would be the first man to live forever.

He closed his eyes for a moment while he savored the pleasures of anticipation, but his delicious reverie was shattered by the comcon bell. He sighed, and crossed the room to the nearest telescreen, pausing only to make sure that his cravat was in order before exposing himself to the unit's camera-eye. His precautions were unnecessary; no face appeared on the screen. There was only a teletext message, cold and impersonal. It was a request that he should call on a man he knew only slightly, and did not like at all. It seemed an unromantic and unpromising beginning to the new phase of his life. He reached out to send a message refusing the invitation, but paused before his fingers could descend upon the keys. The fax light was blinking. He pressed the RECEIVE button. He expected a copy of the message displayed on the screen, but what emerged from the humming printer was a seat reservation for the midnight maglév to San Francisco. Oscar had no intention of going to San Francisco; no such thought had crossed his mind. He could not imagine why anyone, least of all Gabriel King, should send him such a gift, with or without an explanation.

"Curiouser and curiouser," he murmured.

He decided to obey the summons after all. He had never been able to resist temptation, and there was nothing in the world quite as tempting as a mystery.

1

While she waited for the forensic experts to conclude their examination of Gabriel King's apartment, Charlotte Holmes tried to collect her thoughts. This was by far the biggest case of her fledgling career. Routine

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police work was incredibly dull, at least for site-investigation officers, and there had been nothing in her training or experience to prepare her for anything half as bizarre as *this*. Murder was nowadays the rarest of crimes, and such murders as *did* happen usually occurred when rage or spite smashed through the barriers erected by years of biofeedback training. Premeditated murders had fallen out of fashion as soon as it became impossible for the perpetrators to avoid apprehension.

She went to the window at the end of the corridor and looked out over the city. She was on the thirty-ninth floor, and there was quite a view. Central Park looked much as it must have looked in the days before the Devastation, but the rotting skyline was a product of the moment, whose like would probably never be seen again. Charlotte assumed that Gabriel King must have taken up residence in New York so that he might bid for a lion's share of the work involved in the deconstruction of the city. He had always been bigger in demolition than in construction, because he controlled a number of key patents in decay biotechnology. The Decivilization Movement had been a great boon to his business, although its prophets detested Gabriel King as much as they detested all old-style entrepreneurs, especially wealthy multiple rejuvenates. King could easily have made enemies among the people whose crusade he was furthering, and among the business rivals who had competed with him for the contracts—but who among them could have thought up the murder weapon she had just been studying through a camera-eye?

Her waistphone buzzed, and she took the handscreen from its holster. No image appeared. Hal Watson rarely allowed his face to be seen; he was a dealer in data, and preferred to remain invisible within the webs of information that he spun. "Two names," he said. As he spoke, the names appeared on the screen in capital letters: WALTER CZASTKA; OSCAR WILDE. "They're the top people involved in the engineering of flowering plants," the voice continued. "We'll need one of them as a consultant, to double-check the forensic investigation. Czastka's in Micronesia, on an island he's leased in order to build an artificial ecosystem. Wilde's here in New York, but he's just gone through his third rejuvenation and may be incommunicado. Try Czastka first."

"I'll call him," said Charlotte. "What about the girl?"

"Nothing yet. Camscan's under way. Might be able to pick her up somewhere, figure out where she came from or where she went. Has the team come out of the apartment yet?"

"No," said Charlotte, glumly. "I'll stay until they do."

"Don't worry," Hal said. "It'll open up once we have the forensics. With luck, we might crack the case before the story leaks out."

Charlotte sighed, and began punching the buttons on the handset. She tried Czastka first, as instructed. The fact that he was on the other side of the world wasn't of any real consequence, because he'd have to use a camera to inspect the murder-weapon anyhow, and probably wouldn't be able to do much more until the lab had turned up a geneprint. The image which came onto the screen was a grade A sim.

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"Charlotte Holmes," she said. "UN Police. Sending authority." The privacy-breaking codes cut no ice. The sim told her that Czastka was temporarily unreachable. That probably meant that he was messing about somewhere on his island, without a beeper. It wasn't worth the hassle of getting Czastka's house-system to send out a summoner while there was an obvious alternative.

This time, she got a low-grade AI receptionist, which informed her that Oscar Wilde was not in his hotel room at present. She sent her authorization code. The pretty face flickered as the new subroutine was engaged. "Mr. Wilde is in a cab," said the higher-grade receptionist, her simulated voice still honey-sweet. "Sending contact code; destination Trebizond Tower."

Charlotte was just about to retransmit the contact code when she realized that Trebizond Tower was the building on whose thirty-ninth floor she was standing.

"What a coincidence," she murmured, reflectively. Before she had finished wondering what the coincidence might possibly signify, another voice-call came through. This one was from the uniformed officer she had posted at the bottom of the elevator shaft to keep the public at bay.

"There's an Oscar Wilde here," said the officer, laconically. "He says he got a message half an hour ago to come up to King's apartment."

Charlotte frowned. Gabriel King had been dead for quite some time, and no call could possibly have been made from his apartment. "Send him up," she said, tersely. She had an uncomfortable feeling of being out of her depth. She was only a legman, after all; Hal was the real investigator. She hesitated over calling Hal to tell him what had happened, but decided against it. Instead, she went to the elevator to meet the new arrival.

When the man emerged, she felt a curious jolt of astonishment. Hal had mentioned that Wilde was a recent rejuvenate, but she hadn't adapted her expectations to take account of it. Expert witnesses and other consultants usually looked fairly old, but Oscar Wilde looked ten years younger than *she* did; in fact, he was quite the most beautiful man she had ever seen. He bowed gracefully, and then looked up, briefly, at the discreet plastic eye set in the wall, whose security camera recorded every face which passed by.

Public eyes and private bubblebugs were everywhere in a city like New York, and native New Yorkers were entirely used to living under observation; those who had grown up with the situation took it completely for granted. In some unintegrated nations, it still wasn't common for all walls to have eyes and ears, but within the borders of the six superpowers, citizens had long since been required to learn to tolerate the ever-presence of the benevolent mechanical observers which guaranteed their safety. Wilde was neither a native New Yorker nor a genuinely young man, but he didn't give the impression that he resented the presence of the eye at all. If anything, his self-consciousness suggested that he *liked* to be watched.

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"Mr. Wilde?" she said, tentatively. "I'm Charlotte Holmes, UN Police Department."

"Please call me Oscar," said the beautiful man. "What exactly has happened to poor Gabriel?"

"He's dead," Charlotte replied, shortly. "I understand that you received a call from him, or his simulacrum?"

"The message came as text only, with a supplementary fax. It was an invitation—or perhaps a *command*. It was sufficiently impolite to warrant disobedience, but sufficiently intriguing to be tempting."

"That message wasn't sent from this apartment," she told him, bluntly.

"Then you must trace it," he replied, affably, "and discover where it did come from. It would be interesting to know, would it not, who sent it and why?"

They were interrupted by the emergence of the forensic team from the apartment. Charlotte waited patiently while they removed their sterile suits. Oscar looked curiously at all the protective gear, undoubtedly wondering why it had been necessary to use it.

"It's sealed," said the team-leader. "We set up a camera on remote control, and we stripped all the bubbled data there was. We connected his personal machines to the Net so that Hal can trawl the data."

Oscar wore a quizzical expression. Charlotte didn't want to enlighten him yet as to what had happened; she was anxious to see what his reaction would be when she showed him what was in the apartment. She led the way to the screen mounted in the wall outside the apartment door, and punched in the instruction codes.

The camera was still at the scene, but it had been left pointing tastefully away from the *corpus delicti*. The room was furnished in an unusually utilitarian manner; there was no decorative plant life integrated into the walls, nor any kind of inert decoration. There were mural screens on the blank walls, but they displayed plain shades of pastel blue. Apart from the food delivery point, the room's main feature was a particularly elaborate array of special-function telescreens. Charlotte juggled the camera while Oscar peered over her shoulder, raptly. On one of three sofas lay all that remained of the late Gabriel King. The "corpse" was no more than a skeleton, whose white bones were intricately entwined with gorgeous flowers. Charlotte zoomed in, and moved aside to let her companion look closely at the strange garlands and the reclining skeleton.

The stems and leaves of the marvelous plant were green, but the petals of each bloom were black. The waxy stigma at the center of each bell was dark red, and had the form of a *crux ansata*. Oscar Wilde took over the controls, moving them delicately so that he could inspect the structure and texture of the flowers at the minutest level. He followed the rim of a corolla, then passed along a stem which bore huge thorns, paler in color than the flesh from which they sprouted. Each thorn was tipped with red, as though it had drawn blood. The stems wound around and around the long bones of the corpse, holding the skeleton together even

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though every vestige of flesh had been consumed. The plant had supportive structures like holdfasts which maintained the shape of the whole organism and the coherence of the skeleton. The skull was very strikingly embellished, with a single stem emerging from each of the empty eye-sockets.

"Can you be certain that it's Gabriel?" asked Oscar, finally.

"Pretty certain," Charlotte said. "In the absence of retinas the analysts checked the skull-shape and the dental profile. A DNA scan on the bone-marrow will confirm it. It seems that the flowers are composed of what used to be his flesh. You might say that their seeds devoured him as they grew."

"Fascinating," he said, in a tone which had more admiration in it than horror.

"Fascinating!" she echoed, in exasperation. "Can you imagine what an organism like that might *do* if it ever got loose? We're looking at something that could wipe out the entire human race!"

"I think not," said Oscar, calmly. "These are single-sexed flowers from a dioecious species, incapable of producing fertile seed. How long ago did Gabriel die?"

"Between two and three days," she told him, grimly. "He seems to have felt the first symptoms about seventy hours ago; he was incapacitated soon afterward, and died a few hours later."

Oscar licked his lips, as though savoring his own astonishment. "Those delightful flowers must have a voracious appetite," he said.

Charlotte eyed him carefully, wondering exactly what his reaction might signify. "You're something of a flower-designer yourself, I believe." Her gaze flickered momentarily to the green carnation in his lapel. "Could you make plants like those?"

Oscar met her eyes frankly. She was as tall as he, and their stares were perfectly level. He frowned as he considered the matter, then said: "Until I saw this marvel, I would have opined that *no* man could. Clearly, I have underrated one of my peers." He seemed genuinely perplexed, although the level of his concern for the victim and for the fact that a crime had been committed left something to be desired.

Charlotte stared hard at the beautiful man, wondering whether anyone in the world were capable of committing an act like this and then turning up in person to confront and mock the officers investigating the crime. She decided that if he could be guilty of the *first* madness, the second might not be too hard to believe. "I can't help feeling that your appearance here is a very strange coincidence, Mr. Wilde," she said.

"It is indeed," said Oscar, blithely. "Given that it seems to be impossible that I was summoned by the victim, I can only conclude that I was summoned by the murderer."

"I find that hard to believe."

"It *is* hard to believe. But when we have eliminated the impossible, are we not committed to believing the improbable? Unless, of course, you think that *I* did this to poor Gabriel, and have come to gloat over his

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fate? I disliked the man, but I did not dislike him as much as *that*—and if I had decided to murder him, I certainly would not have revisited the scene of my crime in this reckless fashion. A showman I might be, a madman never." He turned back to the screen, and looked again at the deadly flowers, which were still displayed there in intimate close-up.

Charlotte did not want to be put off. "As it happens," she said, "we would have shown all this material to you anyway. We need an expert report on the nature and potential of the organism, and I was given two possible names. I couldn't get through to Walter Czastka. I was trying to call you at your hotel while you were on the way over here."

"I'm offended by the fact that you tried Walter first," Oscar murmured, "but I forgive you."

"Mr. Wilde. . . ." she began, feeling that her patience was being tested too far.

"Yes, of course," he said, "This is a serious matter—a murder investigation. I think I can hazard a guess as to why the summons was sent. I suspect that I was brought here to identify the murderer."

"How?" she demanded.

"By his style," he replied.

"That's ridiculous!" she said, petulantly. "If the murderer had wanted to identify himself, all he had to do was call us. How would he know that you could recognize his work—and why, if he knew it, would he want you to *do* it?"

"Those are interesting questions," admitted Oscar. "Nevertheless, I can only suppose that I was sent an invitation to this mysterious event in order that I might play a part in its unraveling." He paused, and looked at her reproachfully, radiating injured innocence. "You really do suspect that I'm responsible for this, don't you?" he said.

"If not *you,*" she countered, "then who?"

He opened his arms wide in a gesture of exaggerated helplessness. "I cannot claim to be absolutely certain," he said, "but if appearances and my expert judgment *are* to be trusted, these flowers are the work of the man who has always been known to me as Rappaccini!"

2

Charlotte called Hal Watson. "Oscar Wilde's here," she said, making an effort to be businesslike. "Can you trace the call that was made to his hotel room asking him to come? He says the flowers might have been made by a man named Rappaccini."

"Of course," Oscar added, with annoying casualness, "Rappaccini is not his real name. Some long-standing members of the Institute of Genetic Art still prefer to exhibit their work pseudonymously—a hangover from the days of prejudice."

"Are you one of them?" she asked.

Oscar shook his head. "I am fortunate enough to have a real name

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that *sounds* like a pseudonym—my identity thus becomes a kind of double bluff."

"Perhaps," she said, "your identification of Rappaccini as the man who made the flowers is also a double bluff."

Oscar shook his head. "I fear that I have an ironclad alibi. Three days ago I was in the hospital, and the flesh of my outer tissues was unbecomingly fluid. I had been there for some time."

"That doesn't prove anything," Charlotte pointed out. "You might have made the seeds months ago, and made sure that they were delivered—or began to take effect—while you were in the hospital."

"I suppose I might have," said Oscar, wearily, "but I assure you that your investigation will proceed more smoothly if you forget about me and concentrate on Rappaccini."

"Why should a man take the trouble to summon someone capable of identifying him to the scene of the crime?" she asked, with a trace of asperity. "Why didn't he simply leave his calling card?"

"Why didn't he simply shoot Gabriel King with a revolver?" countered the geneticist. "Why go to the effort of designing and making this fabulous plant? There is something very strange going on here, dear Charlotte."

There certainly is, she thought, staring at him, as if by effort she could penetrate the lovely mask to see the secret self within. Oscar, seemingly unalarmed by her scrutiny, began to play with the keys that controlled the camera in the apartment. He zoomed in on something which lay on the glass-topped table. It was a small cardboard rectangle. It had been lacquered over as a safety-measure, but it was still possible to read what was written on it. The words were in French, but Oscar effortlessly read out what Charlotte took to be a translation.

" 'Stupidity, error, sin and poverty of spirit,' " he said, " 'possess our hearts and work within our bodies, and we nourish our fond remorse as beggars suckle their own parasites.' Perhaps the murderer *did* leave his calling card, Inspector Holmes. A man like Gabriel King would hardly have a note of such lines as those."

"Do you recognize them?" asked Charlotte.

"A poem by Baudelaire. *Au lecteur*—that is, 'To the Reader.' From *Les Fleurs du Mal.* A play on words, I think."

Charlotte's audio-link to Hal Watson was still open. "Did you catch that, Hal?" she asked.

"I checked the words already," Hal replied. "He's right."

Charlotte wondered how many men there were in the world who could recognize seven-hundred-year-old poems written in French. Surely, she thought, Oscar Wilde *must* be the person behind all this. But if so, what monstrous game was he playing?

"What significance do you attach to the card?" she asked him, sharply.

"If my earlier reasoning was correct, it must be a message directed to me," replied Oscar. "*All* this is communication—not merely the card, and the message which summoned me, but the flowers, and the crime

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itself. The whole affair is to be *read,* and hence understood. I am here because Rappaccini expects me to be able to interpret and comprehend what he is doing."

Charlotte tried to remain impassive, but she knew that her amazement was showing. She was grateful when the phone in her hand crackled.

"I'm blocked on Rappaccini for the moment," said Hal. "His real name is recorded as Jafri Biasiolo, but there's hardly any official data on Biasiolo at all beyond his birth-date, way back in 2420. It's all old data, of course, and may be just a sketchy construction of disinformation."

Old data tended to be incomplete, often corrupted by all kinds of errors—although she noticed that Hal had said "disinformation," which meant lies, rather than "misinformation." In Hal's view, old data was senile data, too decrepit to be of much use in a slick modern police inquiry. But Gabriel King had been nearly a hundred and fifty years old, and Oscar Wilde—in spite of appearances—must be well over a hundred. If Rappaccini really had been born in 2420, the motive for this affair might go all the way back to the final years of the Aftermath. The Net had been full of holes in those days.

"What about the call which summoned Wilde here?" she asked.

"Placed three days ago from a blind unit, time-triggered to arrive when it did. I've got nowhere with the woman yet. No picture-match, no route to or from the apartment-house. This is going to take longer than I had hoped."

Charlotte digested this information. She was not unduly surprised by the news that the real person behind "Rappaccini" might be difficult to identify. It was easy enough nowadays to establish electronic identities whose telescreen appearances could be maintained and controlled by AI simulacra. Virtual individuals could play so full a role in modern society that their real puppet-masters could easily remain hidden—until they came under the scrutiny of a highly skilled investigator. Hal could get through any conventional information-wall, and work his way through any data-maze, but it would take time. She had a gut feeling that told her that the creator of "Rappaccini" was right in front of her, taunting her with his presence, but she didn't dare say so to Hal. He was no respecter of gut feelings.

"Can you patch the security tape through to the wallscreen here?" she said. "I'd like Mr. Wilde to see it. He seems to know everything else—perhaps he can tell us who the woman is."

"Ah," said Oscar, softly. *"Cherchez la femme!* Without a woman the crime could not be deemed complete!"

"Hal Watson's a top cracksman," Charlotte told him, trying to shake his casual composure. "He can get into all the little electronic backwaters, all the locked-up mines of information. It's impossible to hide anything from him. It's only a matter of time before we get to the bottom of this."

Wilde did not seem in the least intimidated. "I'm delighted to find the two of you working in partnership," he said. "It demonstrates that even

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the higher echelons of the International Bureau of Investigation are home to a sense of humor and a sense of tradition."

He was trying to be clever again, but this time she knew what he meant. Everyone made jokes about it.

On the biggest of the display screens on the far wall there appeared an image of the corridor outside the apartment. The tape had already been edited; no sooner had it started than a young woman came into view, reaching out to activate the doorchime. Her lustrous brown hair was worn unfashionably long. She had clear blue eyes and finely-chiseled features. Even in this day and age, when cosmetic engineers could so easily remold superficial flesh, her beauty was striking. It was not merely the shape of her face, but the undefinable presence which she brought to it. Charlotte could not quite make up her mind whether she was authentically young, or whether she was a successful product of rejuvenative engineering, whose perfection of manner arose from long and careful practice. The woman stepped forward as the door opened, and passed beneath the eye.

The viewpoint abruptly shifted to the second security camera in the hall. King was visible now, with his back to the camera, and Charlotte watched carefully as the girl moved forward, her eyes gazing into his, and raised her head slightly so that he could kiss her on the lips. King did not seem surprised, and he responded to the unspoken invitation. The kiss did not seem particularly passionate; it might, Charlotte thought, have been a polite greeting between people who had some history of intimacy, but were meeting now as friends, or it might have been a friendly kiss exchanged in hopeful anticipation of future intimacy. There was no sound-track on the tape, but few words were spoken before King stood aside to let his visitor precede him into the sitting room. The tape cut again, and they saw the woman re-emerge from the doorway. She was alone, and seemed quite composed as she walked to the main door of the apartment, opened it, and went out.

"She was inside for about half an hour," said Charlotte, drily. "King was still perfectly healthy when she left, and it wasn't until some twelve or thirteen hours later that he called up a diagnostic program. He never had a chance to hit his panic button—the progress of the plant was too swift. We'll know more when we've decanted his bubblebugs, but we won't know what went on in the bedroom. The girl might have nothing at all to do with it, but she *was* the last person to see him alive. We don't know how she fed him the seeds, if indeed she did feed them to him. Do you recognize her?"

"I'm afraid not," said Oscar. "I can only offer the obvious suggestion."

"Which is?"

"Rappaccini's daughter."

Charlotte said nothing, but simply waited for clarification.

"It's another echo of the nineteenth century," said Oscar, with a slight sigh. "Rappaccini borrowed his pseudonym from a story by Nathaniel

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Hawthorne entitled 'Rappaccini's Daughter.' You don't know the period, I take it?"

"Not very well," she said awkwardly. "Hardly at all" would have been nearer the truth.

"Then it's as well that I'm here. Otherwise, this exotic performance would be entirely wasted."

"You think that the man you know as Rappaccini is acting the part of his namesake—just as you make a show of acting the part of yours?"

Oscar shrugged. "In the story, Rappaccini committed no murder—but he did cultivate fatal flowers: *fleurs du mal.* Our Rappaccini has signed his work, for those who have the wit to read the signature. I have a strong suspicion that we have probably seen the murder committed, by means of that gentle kiss which our mysterious visitor delivered. She, of course, would have to be immune to them."

"This is too much," Charlotte explained.

"I quite agree. As lushly extravagant as a poem in prose by Baudelaire himself. But we have been instructed to expect a Baudelairean dimension. I can hardly wait for the next installment of the story."

"You think this is going to happen again?"

"I'm almost sure of it," said Oscar, with infuriating calm. "If Rappaccini intends to present us with a real psychodrama, he will hardly stop when he has only just begun.

"The next murder, by the way, might well be committed in San Francisco."

"Why San Francisco?"

"Because the item which was faxed through to me when I was summoned here was a reservation for the midnight maglev to San Francisco." So saying, he took a sheet of paper from his pocket, and held it out for her inspection.

She took it from him, and stared at it dumbly.

"Why didn't you show me this immediately?" she said.

"My mind was occupied with other things. Anyhow, your colleague Dr. Watson must have obtained a copy of the message when he tried to trace it. Perhaps he has already begun to investigate. I do hope that you will not try to prevent my using the ticket—and that you will allow me to assist you throughout the investigation."

"Why should I?" she replied. She was uncomfortably aware of the fact that she could not prevent his going anywhere in the world he pleased.

"Because the person who committed this murder has gone to extraordinary lengths to make me party to the investigation. If I am supposed to go to San Francisco, there must be a reason. This is only the beginning, dear Charlotte, and if you wish to get to the end with all possible speed, you must stay with me. You can, of course, count on my complete cooperation and my absolute discretion."

And you, Charlotte said, silently, while she stared into his lovely eyes, *can count on being instantly arrested, the moment Hal digs up anything that proves your involvement in this unholy mess.*

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3

IBI headquarters in New York were in the "new" UN complex built in 2431. There had once been talk of the UN taking over the whole of Manhattan Island, but that had gone the way of most dream-schemes during the troubled years of the Aftermath. Now, an even more grandiose plan to move the core of the UN bureaucracy to Antarctica was well-advanced. The same sentence of death had been passed on the IBI complex that had been passed on the whole of New York City, but Gabriel King's brand of controlled rot had not yet been allowed to set in.

"How well did you know Gabriel King?" Charlotte asked Oscar, while they were *en route* in the police car. He had suggested that he come with her until the time appointed for his departure, and she had been quick to agree although she knew that Hal would not approve.

"I supply his company with decorative materials for various building projects. I haven't *met* him for more than twenty years. He and I are by no means kindred spirits."

"And how well do you know Rappaccini?"

"I know the work far better than the man, but there was a period before and after the Great Exhibition when we met regularly. We were often bracketed together by critics who observed a kinship in our ideas, methods, and personalities but I was never convinced of the similarity. Our conversations were never intimate; we discussed art and genetics, never ourselves. It was a long time ago."

She would have pursued the line of questioning further, but the distance between the Trebizond Tower and the UN complex was short, and they arrived before she had a chance to do any serious probing. She asked Oscar to wait in her office while she consulted her colleague in private. "I brought Wilde with me," she told Hal, brusquely.

Even in the dim light, she was easily able to see the expression of distaste which flitted across Hal's face, but all he said was: "Why?"

"Because he knows too much about this business," she said, wishing that it didn't sound so feeble, so *intuitive*. "I know it sounds crazy, but I think he set this whole thing *up*, then turned up in person to watch us wrestle with it!"

"So you think his introduction of 'Rappaccini' name is a red herring?"

"Yes, I do. It's all far too convenient. Is it possible that Rappaccini is entirely his invention?"

"I'll check it out," Hal said. "But we don't need him *here*."

"He wants to go to San Francisco on the midnight maglev."

"Let him. What difference does it make? We can find him, if need be, in San Francisco or on the moon."

"Suppose he were to murder someone *else*," said Charlotte, desperately. It was pointless. Modern detective work was sifting data, carefully sorting the relevant from the irrelevant, and the real information from misinformation and disinformation. Talking to people, being a real-time activity, was generally considered to be an inordinately wasteful use of

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IBI time, to be kept to an absolute minimum even by lowly scene-of-crime officers. "Can I bring him down here?" Charlotte asked, defensively. "I'd like you to see for yourself what he's like—then perhaps you'll understand what I mean."

Hal shrugged in world-weary fashion.

Charlotte collected Oscar from her office, and brought him down into Hal's Underworld. The room was crowded with screens and comcons, but there were enough workstations for them to sit reasonably comfortably.

"Oscar Wilde—Hal Watson," she said, with awkward formality. "Mr. Wilde thinks that his unique insight may be of some help in the investigation."

"I hope so," said Oscar, smoothly. "There are times when instant recognition and artistic sensitivity facilitate more rapid deduction than the most powerful analytical engines. I am an invader in your realm, of course—and I confess that I feel like one of those mortals of old who fell asleep on a burial mound and woke to find himself in the gloomy land of the fairy folk—but I really do feel that I can help you. I have some hours in hand before the midnight maglev leaves."

"I'm always grateful for any help I can get," said Hal, not bothering to feign sincerity. Charlotte saw that her colleague was unimpressed by Oscar Wilde's recently renewed handsomeness. Hal, whose machine-assisted perceptions ground up all the richness and complexity of the social world into mere atoms of data, had not the same idea of beauty as common men. The cataract of encoded data which poured through his screens was *his* reality, and, for him, beauty was to be found in patterns woven out of information or enigmas smoothed into comprehension, not in the hard and soft sculptures of stone and flesh. Unfortunately, the unshadowy world of hard and superabundant data had yet to be persuaded to explain how it had produced the eccentric masterpiece of mere appearances which was the murder of Gabriel King.

"Rappaccini is proving evasive," Hal told Charlotte, while his eyes continued to scan his screens. "His business dealings are fairly elaborate, but he holds a flag-of-convenience citizenship in the Kalahari Republic, and has no recorded residence. His telephonic addresses are black boxes, and he conducts all his affairs through the medium of AIs. The Rappaccini name first became manifest in 2480, when he registered with the Institute of the Genetic Arts in Sydney. He participated in a number of public exhibitions, including the Great Exhibition of 2505, sometimes putting in personal appearances. Unlike other genetic engineers specializing in flowering plants, he never got involved in designing gardens or in the kind of interior decoration that provides you with a living, Mr. Wilde. He seems to have specialized in the design of funeral wreaths."

"Funeral wreaths?" echoed Charlotte, incredulously. The manufacture of funeral wreaths seemed an absurd profession for anyone to follow, even in the guise of a part-time *persona*. Now that serial rejuvenation supposedly guaranteed everyone an extended lifespan, funerals were not the everyday occurrences they once had been. On the other hand, their

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very rarity meant that the ceremony devoted to the commemoration of revered public figures was usually very lavish.

"Rappaccini's flowers have always been grown under contract by middlemen in various parts of Australia." Hal went on, while his fingers roamed in desultory fashion over his keyboards. "I'm checking the routes by which seeds used to be delivered, trying to backtrack them to the laboratories of origin, but he hasn't put out anything new in thirty years. His agents are still making up wreaths and crediting him with royalties, but they've had no personal contact since 2520. He still has a considerable credit balance, and he probably has more in accounts I haven't identified yet. His last manifestation as an active electronic *persona* was in 2527. Incoming telephone calls have been handled since then by a simulacrum which doesn't seem to have referred enquiries elsewhere. Our best hope of discovering the real person behind the network of sims is a thorough interrogation of the financial records. The real person has to have *some* means of recovering or redirecting credit accumulated by the dummy. I also have AIs trawling out the data relating to every recorded public appearance Rappaccini has ever made. We'll pin him down, even if it takes a week. I have all the data in the world to work with—I just need time to find, extract, and combine the relevant items. If your artistic intuition throws up any other helpful suggestions, just let me know, and I'll let loose another pack of data-hounds."

"Mr. Wilde hasn't been able to guess why Rappaccini should want to murder Gabriel King," said Charlotte. "Do we have anything on a possible motive?"

"I'm investigating King's background," said Hal. "If there's a motive there, I'll find it. For the time being, I'm more interested in the method. We know that the murderer has to be a first-class genetic engineer, so I've got AIs looking at the people who have the necessary expertise, trying to eliminate them one by one. It's not easy, of course—there are too many commercial engineers whose work involves the relevant technical skills. Even a structural engineer like Gabriel King might be able to adapt what he knew."

"I don't think so," Oscar said, dubiously.

"Maybe not," said Hal. "Naturally, we'll start with the people whose expertise is most relevant. Walter Czastka—and yourself, of course, Dr. Wilde."

"My life," said Oscar, airily, "is an open book. I fear that the sheer profusion of data will test the stamina of your programs—but that may make it all the easier for them to eliminate me from consideration. The idea that Walter Czastka might be Rappaccini is too absurd to contemplate."

"Why?" asked Charlotte.

"A matter of style," said Oscar. "Walter never had any."

"According to the database, he's the top man in the field—or was."

"I presume you mean that he has made more money than anyone else out of engineered flowers. Walter is a mass-producer, not an artist. I fear

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that if Rappaccini is leading a double life, you will not find his secret identity among the ranks of flower-designers. You'll have to cast your net further afield. He might be an animal engineer, perhaps a human engineer . . . but there are thousands of experts in each category."

"My AIs are indefatigable," Hal assured him. He was interrupted by a quiet beep from one of his comcons. His fingers raced back and forth across the relevant keyboard for a few seconds while he stared thoughtfully at a screen half-hidden from Charlotte's view. After half a minute or so, he said: "You might be interested to see this, Dr. Wilde." He pointed to the biggest of his display screens, mounted high on the wall directly in front of them.

A picture appeared on the left of the screen. It showed a tall man with silver hair, a dark beard trimmed into a goatee, and a prominent nose. "Rappaccini in 2481," Hal said "Taken at the offices of his growers during an early meeting." He pressed more keys and another image appeared in the center of the screen, showing two men side by side. One of them was clearly the same man whose image was already on the screen.

"Isn't that . . . ?" Charlotte began.

"I fear that it is," said Oscar, regretfully. "I looked a lot older then, of course. Taken in 2505, I believe, at the Sydney Exhibition."

It proves nothing that they've been photographed together, Charlotte thought. *That may only be an actor, hired to lend flesh to the illusion.* Somehow, though, she couldn't quite believe it.

"It was 2505," agreed Hal. A third picture appeared, again showing Rappaccini alone. "2520," Hal said. "His last public appearance."

Charlotte compared the three pictures. There was hardly any difference between them. The man had not undergone a full rejuvenation between 2481 and 2520, although he had probably employed light cosmetic reconstruction to maintain the appearance of dignified middle-age.

"If he really was born in 2420, he seems to have delayed rejuvenation far longer than usual," said Hal, pensively. "He must have had a full rejuve very soon after the last picture was taken—I'll get a program to trawl the records. A picture-search program might be able to connect up the face, but that kind of data's very messy. It's proving difficult to track the woman who visited Gabriel King's apartment—there are plenty of cameras in the streets, but a bit of everyday make-up and a wig can cause a good deal of confusion. Faces aren't as widely different as they used to be, now that so many people use light cosmetic engineering to follow fashion-trends. We'll trace her eventually, but . . . again, it's a matter of time."

As he spoke, three signals began beeping and blinking within the space of a second's hesitation, and his attention was instantly diverted. Charlotte and Oscar left the computer-man to the company of his assiduous AIs.

"It's good to know," observed Oscar, as the elevator carried them up, "that there are so many patient recording angels sorting religiously through the multitudinous sins of mankind. Alas, I fear that the capacity

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of our fellow men for *committing* sins may still outstrip their best endeavors."

"On the contrary," Charlotte retorted. "The crime rate keeps going down and down as the number of spy-eyes and bubblebugs scattered around the world goes up and up."

"I spoke of *sins,* not crimes," said Oscar. "What your electronic eyes do *not* see the law may not grieve about, but the capacity for sin will lurk in the hearts of men long after its expression has been banished from their actions."

"People can do what they like in the privacy of their virtual realities," she said. "There's no sin in that."

"If there were no sin in our adventures in imagination," Oscar replied, evidently determined to have the last word, "there would be no enjoyment in them. It is mainly our sense of sin which sustains our appetite for virtual experience. No matter how perfect an image we present to the world, in our appearances and our actions, we are as vicious at heart as we have ever been. If you cannot understand that, my dear, I fear that you will never be a real detective."

4

While he still had time to spare, Charlotte took Oscar to dinner in the IBI's restaurant, where he decided that what his appetite demanded was Tournedos Béarnaise and a bottle of St. Emilion. IBI food technology was easily adequate to the task of meeting these requirements. Its beef was grown from a celebrated local tissue-culture which had long rejoiced in the pet name of Baltimore Bess: a veritable mountain of muscle, "rejuvenated" a hundred times or more by means of the techniques whose gradual perfection in the last two centuries had paved the way for the rejuvenation of human beings. The St. Emilion was authentic, although the whole Bordeaux region had been replanted as recently as 2430, when connoisseurs had decided that the native root-stocks had suffered too much deterioration due to the environmental degradations of the Third Biotech War.

"This crime," said Charlotte, as soon as she felt the time was ripe for talk of business, "is the work of a very remarkable mind."

"Very," Oscar agreed. "I have, of course, a very remarkable mind myself, but genius is always unique. I wear my genius openly, and can barely understand the temperament that would hide away an entire life behind a series of electronic masks, but the man who has invented Rappaccini is clearly a dissimulator. I suspect that this crime has been planned for a very long time. The fictitious Rappaccini might have been *invented* with this murder in mind, and every detail of him has been tailored to its requirements. Absurd as it may seem, I cannot help but wonder whether my involvement as a witness was planned along with the crime."

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Charlotte studied his face soberly. She wondered whether he had designed his own features. It was rare to see such flamboyant femininity in the lines of a male's face, but she had to admit that it suited him.

"What was your impression of the man who posed as Rappaccini?" she asked.

"I liked him. He had an admirable hauteur—as if he considered himself a more profound person by far than the other exhibitors at the Great Exhibition. He was a man of civilized taste and conversation. He appeared to like me, and we shared a taste for all things antiquarian—particularly relics of the nineteenth century, to which we were both linked by our names."

"Do you remember anything *useful?*" asked Charlotte, with some slight impatience. "Anything which might help us to identify the man behind the name."

"I fear not. We never became *friends*. We were both solitary workers, deeply interested in the purely aesthetic aspects of our work. One could not say that of all the exhibitors at Sydney, or even of the majority. Walter Czastka is more typical—he has always worked with an army of apprentices, far more interested in industry than art."

"You don't seem to like Walter Czastka," she observed.

Oscar hesitated briefly before replying. "I don't *dislike* Walter," he said, "although I find him rather dull. He's an able man, in his way, but a hack. Whereas I aspire to perfection in my work, he aims to be prolific. He certainly has Creationist ambitions—he has taken out a lease on a small island in the Pacific, just as I have—but I can't imagine what he is doing with it."

"Walter Czastka knew Gabriel King very well," Charlotte observed, having scanned several pages of data copied to her by Hal Watson while they ate. "They were both born in 2401, and they attended the same university. Czastka has done a great deal of work for King's companies—far more than you. Most murders, you know, involve people who know one another well."

"Walter has not sufficient imagination to have committed this crime," said Oscar, firmly, "even if he had a motive. I doubt that he did; he and Gabriel are—or were—cats of a similar stripe."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that they were both hacks. A modern architect, working with thousands of subspecies of gantzing bacteria, can raise buildings out of almost any materials, shaped to almost any design. The integration of pseudo-living systems to provide water and other amenities adds a further dimension of creative opportunity. A true artist could make buildings that would stand forever as monuments to contemporary creativity, but Gabriel King's main interest was always in *productivity*—razing whole towns to the ground and re-erecting them with the least possible effort. His business was the mass-production of third-rate homes for second-rate people."

"I thought the whole point of bacterial cementation processes is that

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they facilitate the provision of decent homes for the very poor," said Charlotte.

"That is the utilitarian view," agreed Oscar. "But it is two hundred years out of date. Future generations will look back at ours with pity for the recklessness with which we have wasted our aesthetic opportunities. One day, the building of a home will be part of a person's cultivation of his own personality. Making a home will be one of the things every man is expected to do for himself, and there will be no more Gabriel King houses with Walter Czastka sub-systems."

"We can't *all* be Creationists," objected Charlotte.

"Oh, but we *can,*" retorted Oscar. "We can all be everything we *want* to be, or we should at least make every effort to do so. Even men like me, who were born when rejuvenation technology was still in its infancy, should do their utmost to believe that the specter of death is impotent to set a limit upon our achievements. The children of tomorrow will surely live for centuries if only they have the will to do so. You and I, Charlotte, must be prepared to set them a good example. The men of the past had an excuse for all their failures—that man born of woman had but a short time to live, and full of misery—but only cowardice inhibits us now. There is no excuse for any man who fails to be a true artist, and declines to take full responsibility for both his mind and his environment. Too many of us still aim for mediocrity, and are content with its achievement. You don't intend to be a policewoman *all* your life, I hope?"

Charlotte was slightly discomfited by this question. "I'm continuing my education," she said. "My options are still open." Her waistphone began to buzz. She plucked it from its holster and accepted the call. She held it close to her ear so that Oscar would not be able to eavesdrop, assuming that Hal had ferreted out some further morsel of information about Rappaccini. What he actually had to say was rather more disturbing. When she had replaced the phone, she looked at her companion, trying to control the bleakness of her expression.

"Do you know a man named Michi Urashima?" she asked, as blandly as she could.

"Of course I do," said Oscar. "I hope you aren't going to tell me that he's dead. He was a better man by far than Gabriel King."

"Not everyone would agree with you," she said, shortly. Urashima was an expert in computer graphics and image-simulation, famed for the contributions to synthetic cinema he had made before becoming involved in outlawed brainfeed research—which had led to a much-publicized fall from grace.

"How was he killed?" Oscar asked, sadly. "The same method?"

"Yes," she said, tersely. "In San Francisco. There's no need for you to take the maglev now."

"On the contrary," he said. "There is every reason. This affair is still in its early stages, and if we want to witness the further stages of its unfolding, we must follow the script laid down for us. You will come with me, I hope?"

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"Scene-of-crime officers don't operate nationwide," she said. "Police work isn't done that way in this day and age." She knew even as she said it, though, that she still wanted—and still intended—to cling to her suspect.

"Police work may not be," he replied, with an infuriating wave of his hand, "but psychodrama is. The mystery in this, my dear Charlotte, is not *who* has done it, but *why*. I am the man appointed by the murderer himself to the task of following the thread of explanation to the heart of the maze. If you want to *understand* the crime as well as solving it, you must come with me."

"All right," she said, hypocritically. "You've convinced me. I'll stick with you till the bitter end."

5

Charlotte rose earlier than was her habit; the maglev *couchette* was not the kind of bed which encouraged one to sleep in. She called Hal to get an update on the investigation, then wandered along to the dining car to dial up some croissants, coffee, and pills. It was a pity, she thought, that there was no quicker way than the maglev to travel between New York and San Francisco. She had an uncomfortable feeling that she might end up chasing a daisy-chain of murders all around the globe, always twenty-four hours behind the breaking news. But the maglev was the fastest form of transportation within the bounds of United America since the last supersonic jet had flown four centuries before. The power-crises of the Aftermath were ancient history now, but the inland airways were so cluttered with private flitterbugs and helicopters, and the green zealots so avid in their crusades against large areas of concrete, that commercial aviation had never really gotten going again. Even intercontinental travelers tended to prefer the plush comfort of airships to the hectic pace of supersonics. Electronic communication had so completely taken over the lifestyles and folkways of modern man that most business was conducted via comcon.

By the time Charlotte had finished her breakfast, the train was only four hours out of San Francisco. Oscar joined her then, looking neat and trim although the green carnation in his buttonhole was now rather bedraggled. "Such has been the mercy of our timetable," he observed, "that we have slept through Missouri and Kansas."

She knew what he meant. Missouri and Kansas were distinctly lacking in interesting scenery since the re-stabilization of the climate had made their great plains prime sites for the establishment of vast tracts of artificial photosynthetics. Nowadays, the greater part of the Midwest looked rather like sections of an infinite undulating sheet of a dull near-black violet which offended unpracticed eyes. The SAP-fields of Kansas always gave Charlotte the impression of looking at a gigantic piece of frilly corrugated cardboard. Houses and factories alike had retreated

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beneath the dark canopy, and parts of the landscape were almost featureless. By now, though, the maglev passengers had the more elevating scenery of Colorado to look out upon. Most of the state had been returned to wilderness, and its centers of population had taken advantage of the versatility of modern building techniques to blend in with their surroundings. Chlorophyll green was infinitely easier on the human eye than SAP-violet, presumably because millions of years of adaptive natural selection had helped to make it so.

While Oscar ordered eggs duchesse for breakfast, Charlotte activated the wallscreen beside their table and called up the latest news. The fact of Gabriel King's death was recorded, but there was nothing as yet about the exotic circumstances. The IBI never liked to advertise crimes until they were solved, but the exotic circumstances of King's death would make it a hot topic of gossip, and she knew that it was only a matter of time before bootleg copies of the security tapes leaked out.

"My dear Charlotte," said Oscar, "you have the unmistakable look of one who woke too early and has been working too hard."

"I couldn't sleep," she told him. "I took a couple of boosters with breakfast. They'll clear my head soon enough."

Oscar shook his head. "No one who looks twenty when he is really a hundred and thirty-three can possibly be less than worshipful of the wonders of medical science," he said, "but, in my experience, the use of it to maintain one's sense of equilibrium is a false economy. We must have sleep in order to dream, and we must dream in order to discharge the chaos from our thoughts, so that we may reason effectively while we are awake. Now, what about the second murder? Any progress?"

She frowned. She was supposed to be the one asking the questions. "Did you know Urashima personally, or just by reputation?" she countered, determined not to let him get the upper hand.

"We met on several occasions," said Oscar, equably. "He was an artist, like myself. I respected his work. Although I didn't know him well, I would have been glad to count him a friend."

"He'd been inactive of late," she said, watching her suspect closely. "He hadn't worked commercially since his conviction for illegal experimentation thirteen years ago. He served four years house arrest and control of communication. He was probably still experimenting, though, and he may well have been engaged in illegal activities."

"His imprisonment was an absurd sentence for an absurd crime," Oscar opined. "He placed no one in danger but himself."

"He was playing about with brainfeed equipment," she said. "Not just memory boxes or neural stimulators, but mental cyborgization. And he didn't just endanger himself; he was pooling information with others."

"Of course he was," said Oscar. "What on earth is the point of hazardous exploration unless one makes every effort to pass on the legacy of one's discoveries?"

"Have *you* ever experimented with that sort of stuff?" Charlotte asked, vaguely. Like everyone else, she bandied about phrases like "psychedelic

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synthesizer" and "memory box," but she had little or no idea of the way such legendary devices were supposed to work. Ever since the first development of artificial synapses capable of linking up human nervous systems to silicon-based electronic systems, numerous schemes for hooking up the brain to computers had been devised, but almost all the experiments had gone disastrously wrong, often ending up with badly brain-damaged subjects. The brain was the most complex and sensitive of all organs, and disruption of brain-function was the one kind of disorder that twenty-sixth century medical science was impotent to correct. The UN had forced a world-wide ban on devices for connecting brains directly to electronic apparatus, for whatever purpose, but the main effect of the ban had been to drive research underground. Even an expert fisherman like Hal Watson would not have found it easy to figure out what sort of work might be going on, where, and why.

"You've just heard me express my dislike of everyday chemical boosters," Oscar pointed out. "There is nothing I value more than my genius, and I would never knowingly risk my clarity and agility of mind. That does not mean that I disapprove of what Michi Urashima did. He was not an infant, in need of protection from himself. His perennial fascination was the simulation of experience, and for him, the building of better visual images was only a beginning. He wanted to allow his audience to *live* in his illusions, not merely to stand outside and watch. If we are ever to make a proper interface between natural and artificial intelligence, we will need the genius of men like Michi. Now, have you anything to tell me about his death which may help to unravel the puzzle which confronts us?"

"Perhaps," she said, grudgingly. "Did you know that Michi Urashima was at college with Gabriel King—and, for that matter, with Walter Czastka?" She permitted herself a slight smile of satisfaction when Oscar raised an interested eyebrow.

"I did not," he said. "Was Rappaccini, perhaps, also at this particular institution of learning? Has he been harboring some secret grudge for a hundred and thirty years? Where was this remarkable college, where so many of our great men first met?"

"Wollongong, in Australia."

"Wollongong!" he exclaimed, in mock horror. "If only it were Oxford, or the Sorbonne, or even Sapporo . . . but it *is* an interesting coincidence."

Charlotte regarded him speculatively. "Hal transmitted a copy of the scene-of-crime tape," she said. "Urashima's last visitor was a woman. She'd changed her appearance quite considerably, but we're pretty sure that she's the same one who visited Gabriel King."

Oscar nodded. "Rappaccini's daughter," he said. "I expected it."

"The main thrust of Hal's investigation is to identify and track the woman," Charlotte went on. "He's set up programs to monitor every security camera in San Francisco. If she's already gone, we might still be able to pick up her trail. The problem is that she left Urashima's house

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more than three days ago; if she moved fast, she may have delivered more packages in the interim."

"We must certainly assume that she did," Oscar agreed. "Did she leave another calling card, by any chance?"

"Not this time. But she kissed Michi Urashima, exactly as she kissed Gabriel King." She had decanted the tape on to a disc, so she only had to slot it in. Like the tape she had displayed for Oscar outside Gabriel King's apartment, it had been carefully edited from the various spy-eyes and bubblebugs that had been witness to Michi Urashima's murder.

The similarity between the two records was almost eerie. The woman's hair was silvery blonde now, but still abundant. It was arranged in a precipitate cataract of curls. The eyes were the same electric blue but the cast of the features had been altered subtly, making her face thinner and apparently deeper. The changes were sufficient to deceive a standard picture-search program, but because Charlotte *knew* that it was the same woman, she could *see* that it was the same woman. There was something in the way her eyes looked steadily forward, something in her calm poise that made her seem remote, not quite in contact with the world through which she moved. She was wearing a dark blue costume now, which hung loose about her seemingly fragile frame. It was the kind of outfit which would not attract much attention in the street. As before, the woman said nothing, but moved naturally into a friendly kiss of greeting before preceding her victim into an inner room beyond the reach of conventional security cameras. Her departure was similarly recorded by the spy-eye. She seemed perfectly composed and serene.

There were more pictures to follow, showing the state of Urashima's corpse as it had eventually been discovered. There were long, lingering close-ups of the fatal flowers. The camera's eye moved into a black corolla as if it was venturing into the interior of a great greedy mouth, hovering around the *crux ansata* tip of the blood-red style like a moth fascinated by a flame. There was, of course, a sterile film covering the organism, but it was quite transparent; its presence merely served to give the black petals a weird sheen, adding to their supernatural quality.

Charlotte let the tape run through without comment, then flipped the switch. "The flowers aren't genetically identical to the ones used to kill King. Our lab people think that the germination of the seeds may have been keyed to some trigger unique to the victim's genotype—that each species was designed to kill a specific victim, while being harmless to everyone else. That would explain how the girl can carry the seeds around. She traveled to San Francisco on a scheduled maglev. The card she used to buy the ticket connects to a credit account held in the name of Jeanne Duval. It's a dummy account, of course. She didn't use the Duval account to reach New York, and she'll presumably use another to leave San Francisco."

"You might set the search programs you're using to find her to pick up the names Daubrun and Sabatièr," Oscar advised. "Jeanne Duval

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was one of Baudelaire's mistresses, and it's possible she has the others on her list of *noms de guerre.*"

Charlotte transmitted this information to Hal. The maglev was taking them down the western side of the Sierra Nevada now, and she had to swallow air to counter the pressure on her eardrums.

"By the time we get to San Francisco," she said, "there won't be anything to do there except to wait for the next phone call."

"Perhaps not," said Oscar. "But even if she's long gone, we'll be in the right place to follow in her footsteps."

The buzzer on Charlotte's waistphone sounded, and she snatched it up.

"One of Rappaccini's bank accounts became active," Hal told her. "A debit went through ten minutes ago. The credit was drawn from another account, which had a guarantee arrangement with the Rappaccini account."

"Never mind the technical details," she said. "What did the credit buy? Have the police at the contact point managed to get the user?"

"I'm afraid not. The debit was put through by a courier service. They don't collect until they've actually made delivery. We've got a picture of the woman from their spy-eye, looking just the same as she did when she went to Urashima's apartment, but it's three days old. It must have been taken before the murder, immediately after she arrived in San Francisco."

Charlotte groaned softly. "What did she send, and where to?"

"A package she brought in. We don't know what's in it. It was addressed to Oscar Wilde, Green Carnation Suite, Majestic Hotel, San Francisco. It's there now, waiting."

"We don't have the authority to open that package without your permission," Charlotte told Oscar. "Can I send an instruction to the San Francisco police, telling them to inspect it immediately?"

"Certainly not," Oscar said, without hesitation. "It would spoil the surprise. We'll be there in less than an hour."

Charlotte frowned. "You're inhibiting the investigation," she said. "I want to know what's in that package. It *could* be a packet of seeds."

"I think not," said Oscar, airily. "If Rappaccini wished to murder me, he surely wouldn't treat me less generously than his other victims. If they're entitled to a fatal kiss, it would be unjust and unaesthetic to send my *fleurs du mal* by mail."

"In that case," she said, "it's probably another ticket. If we open it now, we might be able to find out where her next destination is in time to stop her making her delivery."

"I fear not," said Oscar. "The delayed debit was timed to show up *after* the event. The third victim is probably dead already. The package is addressed to me and I shall open it. That's what Rappaccini intended. I'm sure he has his reasons."

"Mr. Wilde," she said, in utter exasperation, "you seem to be incapable of taking this matter seriously."

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"On the contrary," he replied, with a sigh. "I believe that I am the only one who is taking it seriously *enough*. You seem to be unable to look beyond the mere fact that people are being killed. If we are to come to terms with this strange performance, we must take *all* its features as seriously as they are intended to be taken. I am as deeply involved in this as the victims, though I cannot as yet understand why Rappaccini has chosen to involve me."

"You'd better make sure that nothing you do fouls up our investigation," said Charlotte, ominously, "because we won't hesitate to throw the book at you if we find a reason."

"I fear," said Oscar, sadly, "that Rappaccini has already thrown more than enough books into this affair himself."

6

The promised package lay on a table in the reception room of the Green Carnation Suite. It was round, about a hundred centimeters in diameter and twenty deep. Charlotte had taken the precaution of arming herself with a spraygun loaded with a polymer which, on discharge, formed itself into a bimolecular membrane and clung to anything it touched.

Oscar reached out to take hold of the knot in the black ribbon which secured the emerald green box. It yielded easily to his nimble fingers, and he drew the ribbon away. He lifted the lid and laid it to one side. As Charlotte had half-expected since seeing the shape of the container, it contained a Rappaccini wreath: an intricate tangle of dark green stalks and leaves. The stalks were thorny, the leaves slender and curly. There was an envelope in the middle of the display, and around the perimeter were thirteen black flowers like none that she had ever seen before. They looked like black daisies.

Oscar Wilde extended an inquisitive forefinger, and was just about to touch one of the flowers, when it moved.

"Look out!" said Charlotte.

As though the first movement was a kind of signal, *all* the "flowers" began to move. It was a most alarming effect, and Oscar reflexively snatched back his hand as Charlotte pressed the trigger of the spraygun and let fly. When the polymer hit them, the flowers' movements became suddenly jerky. They thrashed and squirmed in obvious distress. The limbs which had mimicked sepals struggled vainly for purchase upon the thorny green ring on which they had been mounted. Now that Charlotte could count them she was able to see that each of the creatures had eight hairy legs. What had seemed to be a cluster of florets was a much-embellished thorax.

"Poor things," said Oscar, as he watched them writhe. "They'll asphyxiate, you know, with that awful stuff all over them."

"I may have just saved your life," observed Charlotte, drily. "Those things are probably poisonous."

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Oscar shook his head. "This was no attempted murder. It's a work of art—probably an exercise in symbolism."

"According to you," she said, "the two are not incompatible."

"Not even the most reckless of dramatists," said Oscar, affectedly, "would destroy his audience at the end of act one. We are perfectly safe, my dear, until the final curtain falls. Even then Rappaccini will want us alive and well. He surely will not risk interrupting a standing ovation and cutting short the cries of *encore!*"

Charlotte reached out to pick up the sticky envelope at the center of the ruined display, and contrived to open it. She took out a piece of paper. It was a rental car receipt, overstamped in garish red ink: ANY ATTEMPT TO INTERROGATE THE PROGRAMMING OF THIS VEHICLE WILL ACTIVATE A VIRUS THAT WILL DESTROY ALL THE DATA IN ITS MEMORY. It was probably a bluff, but she didn't suppose that Oscar Wilde would let her call it—and she still didn't have any legal reason to overturn his decisions.

As soon as she had updated Hal, she got through to the rental car company and demanded all the information they had. They told her that they had delivered the car to the hotel three days earlier, and that they had no knowledge of any route or destination which might have been programmed into its systems after dispatch. Hal quickly ascertained that the account which had been used to pay for the car had enough credit to cover three days' storage and a journey of two thousand kilometers.

"That could take you as far north as Juneau or as far south as Guadalajara," Hal pointed out, unhelpfully. "I can't tell how many more accounts there might be on which Rappaccini and the woman might draw, but I've traced several that are held under other names; it's possible that one of them is his real name.

"What are they?" Oscar asked.

"Samuel Cramer, Gustave Moreau, and Thomas Griffiths Wainewright."

Oscar sighed heavily. "Samuel Cramer is the protagonist of a novella by Baudelaire," he said. "Moreau was a French painter. Wainewright was the subject of a famous essay by my namesake called 'Pen, Pencil and Poison.' It's just a series of jokes, presumably intended to amuse me."

The car which awaited them was roomy and powerful. Once it was free of the city's traffic control computers it would be able to zip along the transcontinental at two hundred kph. If they *were* headed for Alaska, Charlotte thought, they'd be there some time around midnight.

As soon as they were both settled into the back seat, Oscar activated the car's program. It slid smoothly up the ramp and into the street. Then he called up a lunch menu from the car's synthesizer, and looked it over critically.

"I fear," he said, "that we are in for a somewhat Spartan trip."

Charlotte took out her handscreen and began scrolling through some pages of data that one of Hal's AIs had compiled from various dossiers. It

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had found many links between Gabriel King and Michi Urashima—more links than anyone could reasonably have expected. It seemed that the construction engineer and the graphic artist had remained in close touch throughout their long lives. Many of Urashima's experiments had been funded by King, and the two of them had embarked upon several ventures in partnership. Charlotte could see that the AI searches had only just begun to get down into the real dirt. No one whose career was as long as King's was likely to be completely clean, but a man in his position could keep secrets even in today's world, just as long as no one with state-of-the-art equipment actually had a reason to probe. It was only to be expected that this murder would expose a certain amount of dirty linen, but this particular collection seemed overabundant. It seemed entirely probable that Gabriel King had been a major stockholder in the clandestine brainfeed business, and that he had not only funded Urashima but had established all kinds of shields to hide his work and its spinoff. Was there a motive for multiple murder in there? But if there was, where did Rappaccini and Oscar Wilde fit in? Why all the bizarre frills? And who was the mystery woman?

When Charlotte had digested the dossier's contents, she plugged her waistphone into the car's transmitter and phoned Hal.

"Anything new on the woman?" Charlotte inquired.

"No identification yet," said Hal. "We haven't picked up a visual trace since she left Urashima's apartment. I've loosened up the match criteria, but she must have done a first-rate job of disguising herself. Where are you?"

Charlotte realized, guiltily, that she had not even bothered to take note of the direction in which they were headed. She squinted out of the window, but there was nothing to be seen now except the eight lanes of the superhighway.

"We're headed south," said Oscar, helpfully.

"She may have gone south," Charlotte said to Hal. "Better check all plausible destinations between here and Mexico City." She signed off.

"It might be as well," Oscar said, ruminatively, "if I were to have a word with Walter Czastka."

"No, you don't!" Charlotte said, suddenly remembering that she should have called Czastka herself, several hours ago. "That's *my* job. Walter Czastka may be a suspect."

"I know Walter," said Oscar. "He was a difficult man even in his prime, and he's not in his prime now. It really would be better if I did it. You can listen in."

She weighed up the pros and cons. It might, she thought, be interesting to see what Oscar Wilde and Walter Czastka had to say to one another. "You're a free man," she said, in the end. "Go ahead." She moved to the edge of her seat, out of range of the tiny eye mounted above the car's wallscreen. She watched Oscar punch out the codes on the keyboard. He didn't need to call a directory to get the number.

She could see the image on the screen even though she was out of

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camera-range. She knew immediately that the face that appeared was that of Walter Czastka himself. No one would ever have programmed so much ostentatious world-weariness into a simulacrum.

"Hello, Walter," said Oscar.

Czastka peered at the caller without the least flicker of recognition. He looked unwell. Charlotte could not imagine that he had ever been handsome, and he obviously thought it unnecessary to compromise with the expectations of others by having his face touched up by tissue-control specialists. In a world where almost everyone was beautiful, or at least distinguished, Walter Czastka was an anomaly—but there was nothing monstrous about him. His sad eyes were faded blue, and his stare had a rather disconcerting quality. Charlotte knew that Czastka was exactly the same age as Gabriel King and Michi Urashima, but he looked far worse than either of them. Perhaps rejuvenation hadn't taken properly.

"Yes?" he said.

"Don't you know me?" asked Oscar, in genuine surprise.

For a moment, Czastka simply looked exasperated, but then his stare changed as enlightenment dawned. "Oscar Wilde!" he said, his tone redolent with awe. "My God, you look . . . I didn't look like that after *my* last rejuvenation! But that must be your third—how could you need . . . ?"

Oddly enough, Oscar did not swell with pride in reaction to this display of naked envy. "Need," he murmured, "is a relative thing. I'm sorry, Walter; I didn't mean to startle you."

"You'll have to be brief, Oscar," said Czastka, curtly. "I'm expecting the UN police to call—they tried to get past my AI yesterday, but didn't bother to leave a message to say what they wanted. They're taking their time about getting back to me. Damn nuisance."

"The police can break in on us if they really want to," said Oscar, gently. "Have you heard the news about Gabriel King?"

"No. Is it something I should be interested in?"

"He's dead, Walter. Murdered by illegal biotechnics—a very strange kind of flowering plant."

Charlotte couldn't read Czastka's expression. "Murdered by a plant?" he repeated, disbelievingly.

"I've seen the pictures," said Oscar. "The police might want you to take a look at the forensic reports. They have a suspicion that you or I might have designed the murder-weapon, but I'm morally certain that it's Rappaccini's work. Do you remember Rappaccini?"

Charlotte began to regret having given Oscar Wilde permission to make this call. Perhaps it would have been better to ask Czastka to make a separate judgment. If both of them, without collusion, identified Rappaccini as the designer . . . but how could she be sure that they weren't in collusion already?

"Of course I remember Rappaccini," snapped Czastka. "I'm not senile, you know. Specializes in funeral wreaths—a silly affectation, I always thought. I dare say you know him better than I do, you and he being birds of a feather. Are you saying that he murdered Gabriel King?"

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"Michi Urashima is dead too," Oscar said. "He and Gabriel were killed by seeds which grew inside them and consumed their flesh. This is important, Walter. Genetic art may have come a long way since the protests at the Great Exhibition, but the green zealots wouldn't need much encouragement to put us back on their hate list. Neither of us wants to go back to the days when we had petty officials looking over our shoulders while we worked. When the police release the full details of this case, there's going to be a lot of adverse publicity. I'm trying to help the police find Rappaccini. I wondered whether you might remember anything that might provide a clue to his real identity."

Czastka's face had a curious ochreous pallor as he stared at his interlocutor. "King and Urashima—both dead?" He didn't seem to be keeping up with Oscar's train of thought.

"Both dead," Oscar confirmed. "I think there might be others. You knew Gabriel and Michi from way back, didn't you?"

"So what?" said Czastka, grimly. "I didn't know Urashima as well as you did, and all my dealings with King were strictly business. We were never friends—or enemies." Charlotte noted that Czastka's eyes had narrowed, but she couldn't tell whether he was alarmed, suspicious, or merely impatient.

"No one's accusing you of anything," said Oscar, carefully. "I've told the police that you couldn't possibly be the man behind Rappaccini—and I think they're more inclined at present to suspect that *I* might be. We all need to find out who he really is. Can you help?"

"No," said Czastka, without hesitation. "I never knew him. I've had some dealings with his company, but I haven't set eyes on him since the Great Exhibition."

"What about his daughter?" said Oscar, abruptly.

If he intended to surprise the other man, it didn't work. Czastka's stare was as stony as it was melancholy. "What daughter?" he said. "I never met a daughter—not that I remember. It was all a long time ago. I can't remember anything at all. It's nothing to do with me. Leave me alone, Oscar—and tell the police to leave me alone!"

Charlotte could see that Oscar Wilde was both puzzled and disappointed by the other man's reaction. As Czastka closed the connection, Oscar's face wrinkled into a frown.

"That wasn't much help, was it?" she said, unable to resist the temptation to take him down a peg. "He doesn't even *like* you."

"As soon as I told him about the murders, he froze," Oscar said, thoughtfully. "He's hiding something, but I can't imagine *what*—or why. I would never have thought it of him. There's something very strange about this. Perhaps your clever associate and his indefatigable assistants should start attacking the problem from the other end."

"What's *that* supposed to mean?" she demanded.

"The Wollongong connection. We ought to find out how many other people there are in the world who were at Wollongong at the relevant time. Walter and the two victims are uncommonly old men, even in a

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world where serial rejuvenation is commonplace. It's possible that such a list might contain the names of other potential victims—and the university records might offer a clue as to a possible motive."

Charlotte called Hal to relay the suggestion, but he scornfully informed her that he had already put two AIs to work on it. "One more thing," he added. "Rappaccini's pseudonymous bank accounts have been used over the years to purchase materials that were delivered for collection to the island of Kauai, in Hawaii. They were collected by boat. There are fifty or sixty islets west and south of Kauai, natural and artificial. Some are leased to Creationists for experiments in the construction of artificial ecosystems." Charlotte had already turned to look at Oscar, and was on the point of forming a predatory grin when Hal continued: "Oscar Wilde's island is half an ocean away in Micronesia—but Walter Czastka's is nearby. All the supplies that Czastka purchases in his own name are picked up from Kauai, by boat."

7

Charlotte winced as the car lurched slightly, throwing her sideways. They had left the superhighway and were climbing into the hills along roads which did not seem to have been properly maintained. This had been a densely populated region in the distant past, but California had suffered several plague attacks in the Second Biotech War, and rural areas like this one had been so badly hit as to cause a mass exodus of refugees. Most of those who had survived had never returned, preferring to relocate to more promising land. Three quarters of the original ghost towns of the Sierra Nevada were ghost towns still, even after three hundred years. The car had not been designed for climbing mountains and it had slowed considerably when it first began to follow the winding road up into the foothills of the mountain range. It was picking up speed again now. Charlotte called up a map of the region on to the car's wallscreen, but it was stubbornly unhelpful in the matter of providing clues as to where they might be going or why.

"The region up ahead is real wasteland," she told Oscar. "Nobody lives there. Nothing grows except lichens and the odd stalk of grass. The names on the map are just distant memories."

"*Something* must be up there," Oscar said, shifting uncomfortably as the car took another corner. "Rappaccini wouldn't bring us up here if there were nothing to see."

Charlotte wiped the map from the screen, and replaced it with a list which Hal had beamed through to her. There were twenty-seven names on it: the names of all the surviving men and women who had attended the University of Wollongong while Gabriel King, Michi Urashima, and Walter Czastka had been students there. The names, that is, of all the *supposed* survivors; Hal's patient AIs had so far only managed to obtain positive confirmation of the continued existence of twenty-three. The

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business of trying to contact them all was proving uncommonly difficult; they all had high-grade sims to answer their phones, and most of the sims had been programmed for maximum unhelpfulness. IBI priority codes were empowered to demand maximum co-operation from every AI in the world, but no AI could do more than its programming permitted.

"These people are crazy!" she complained.

"They're all *old,*" Oscar pointed out. "Every single one of them is a double rejuvenate. They were born during the Aftermath, when the climate was still disturbed, the detritus of the plague wars hadn't yet finished claiming casualties, the Net was still highly vulnerable to software sabotage, and cool fusion and artificial photosynthesis were brand new. All of them were conceived by living mothers, and I doubt if one in five was carried to term in an artificial womb. They're strangers in today's world, and many of them don't have any sense of belonging any more. Half of them have nothing left to desire except to die in peace, and more than half—as your associates must have found out in trying to cross-examine them—have no memory at all of the long-gone years they spent at the University of Wollongong."

She looked at him curiously. "But you're not much younger than they are," she said, "and you're a *triple* rejuvenate. *You* obviously don't feel like that."

"The fact that *I* do not," he said, drily, "is the greatest proof of my genius. I am a very unusual individual—as unusual, in my way, as Rappaccini."

Charlotte's waistphone buzzed, and she lifted it from its holster reflexively.

"You can take Paul Kwiatek off your list," Hal's voice said, dully. "They just found him dead. Same method, same visitor."

Oscar leaned over to speak into the mouthpiece. "Who's dead?" he asked Hal.

"Paul Kwiatek. Another Wollongong graduate, born 2401."

Charlotte snatched up the phone again. Determined to be businesslike, she said: "Where?"

"Bologna, Italy."

"Bologna! But . . . when?"

"Some time last week. It looks as though he was killed before King. The woman probably flew to New York on an intercontinental flight from Rome. I'll try to figure out where she was before that—there might be other bodies we haven't found yet. We're stepping up our attempts to contact and question the others on the list, but I don't know how to work out which of them are potential victims, let alone potential murderers."

"Czastka knows *something.*" said Charlotte. "He might be the key."

"We've just talked to him," Hal said, in his infuriating fashion. "He denies knowing anything at all that would connect him with King, Urashima and Kwiatek, and he denies having received the equipment and supplies paid for by the Rappaccini accounts. So far, there's no proof that he's lying. We're worried about another name on the Wollongong

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list—Magnus Teidemann. He's supposed to be out in the wilderness somewhere in mid-Africa, but he's been ominously silent for some time. If he's dead, it could take us a week to find the body. I've ordered a search. That's all for now." He broke the connection, without waiting for Charlotte to respond.

Charlotte had already recalled the list, and had begun tracing a path through the back-up information. "Paul Kwiatek," she said to Oscar. "Software engineer. Should I call up a more detailed biog, or do you know him?"

"No," said Oscar, "but I know Teidemann by repute. He was a major force in the UN a hundred years ago, one of the inner circle of world-planners. Gabriel King probably knew him personally. The unfolding network of cross-connections is going to deluge your friend's AIs with data. There's too much of it to sort out and unravel, unless we can somehow cut the Gordian knot at a stroke."

"It doesn't work like that," she told him, although she wasn't entirely convinced. "The machines are so fast that a profusion of data doesn't trouble them. The real problem is the *age* of the data. If the motive for the murders really does go back a hundred and fifty years . . . but if it does, why wait until *now* to carry them out? Why murder men who are already on the threshold of extinction?"

"Why indeed?" echoed Oscar Wilde.

"It's insane," Charlotte opined, being unable to see any other explanation. "It's some weird obsession." Such things were not unheard of, even in these days of chemical retuning and biofeedback training. The brain was no longer the great mystery it once had been, but it kept stubborn and jealous guard over many of its secrets.

"Obsession might sustain memories which would otherwise fade away," Oscar admitted. "If there were no obsession involved, no murderer could nurse a plan as elaborate as this for as long as Rappaccini must have nursed it."

Charlotte returned to her contemplation of the list displayed on the screen. Apart from Teidemann's, none of the names meant anything at all to her. Only a handful were listed as genetic engineers of any kind, and none seemed to have the right kind of background to be Rapaccini—except, of course, for Walter Czastka. As she scanned the subsidiary list of addresses, though, her eye was caught by the word "Kauai." She stopped scrolling. One Stuart McCandless, ex-Chancellor of the University of Oceania, had retired to Kauai. She was tempted to call Hal and trumpet her discovery, but she knew what his response would be. His AIs would have turned up the coincidence; investigation of the data-trail would be in hand. She wished, briefly, that she were back in New York. There, at least, she would be involved in the routine pursuit of inquiries, making calls. What was she accomplishing out here, in the middle of nowhere?

She glanced out of the side-window as the car swung slowly and carefully around a bend into one of the ghost-towns whose names were still

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recorded on the map in spite of the fact that no one had lived in them for centuries. The ancient stone buildings had been weathered by dust-storms, but they still retained the sharp angles which proudly proclaimed their status as human artifacts. The land around them was quite dead, incapable of growing so much as a blade of grass, and every bit as desolate as an unspoiled lunar landscape, but the shadowy scars of human habitation still lay upon it.

In the long-gone days when the earth had lain temporarily unprotected by an ozone layer, this would have been a naked place. Even then, it would probably have been almost empty; this part of the state, within a couple of hundred kilometers of Los Angeles, had been very hard hit even by the first and least of the three plague wars—whose victims, not knowing that there was far worse to come, had innocently called it the Great Plague War.

8

The wallscreen blanked out. While Charlotte was still wondering what the interruption signified, the car's AI relayed a message in large, flamboyant letters: WELCOME, OSCAR: THE PLAY WILL COMMENCE IN TEN MINUTES. THE PLAYHOUSE IS BENEATH THE BUILDING TO YOUR RIGHT.

"Play?" said Charlotte, bitterly. "Have we come all this way just to watch a *play?*"

"It appears so," said Oscar, as he opened the door and climbed out into the sultry heat of the deepening evening. "Do you carry transmitter-eyes and bubblebugs in that belt you're wearing?"

"Of course," she said.

"I suggest that you place a few about your person," said Oscar. "I have only the one bubblebug of my own, which I shall mount on my forehead."

Charlotte turned to stare at the building to their right. It did not look in the least like a theater. It might once have been a general store. It was roofless now, nothing more than a gutted shell.

"Why bring us out here to the middle of nowhere?" she demanded, angrily. "Why didn't he just record it on tape for transmission in a theater in San Francisco or New York?" As she spoke, she planted two electronic eyes above her own eyebrows.

Oscar quickly located a downward-leading flight of stone steps inside the derelict building. Charlotte planted head-high nanolights every six or seven steps to illuminate their passage, which had been hollowed out using bacterial deconstructors far more modern than the building itself. By the time they reached the bottom of the stair, there were several meters of solid rock separating her from the car; she knew that her transmitter-eye would only function as a recording-device. At the bottom, there was a door made from some kind of synthetic organic material; it had no handle, but when Oscar touched it with his fingertips, it swung

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inward. "All doors in the world of theater are open to Oscar Wilde," he muttered sarcastically.

Beyond the doorway was a well of impenetrable shadow. Charlotte automatically reached up to the wall inside the doorway, placing another nanolight there, but the darkness seemed to soak up its luminance effortlessly, and it showed her nothing but a few square centimeters of matte-black wall. The moment Oscar took a tentative step forward, however, a small spotlight winked on, picking out a two-seater sofa upholstered in black.

"Very considerate," said Oscar, drily. He invited her to move ahead of him, and she did. Five seconds after they were seated, the spotlight winked out. Charlotte could not suppress a small gasp of alarm. The nanolight she had set beside the door shone like a single distant star in an infinite void.

When light returned, it was cleverly directed away from them; Charlotte could not see Oscar, nor her own body. It was as if she had become a disembodied viewpoint, like a bubblebug, looking out upon a world from which her physical presence had been erased. She seemed to be ten or twelve meters away from the event which unfolded before her eyes, but the distance was illusory. Cinematic holograms of the kind to which Michi Urashima had devoted his skills before turning to more dangerous toys were adept in the seductive art of sensory deception.

The "event" was a solo dance. The performer was a young woman, whose face was made up to duplicate the appearance that the image's living model had presented to Michi Urashima's spy-eyes. Only her hair and costume were different; the hair was now long, straight and jet-black, and she was dressed in sleek, translucent chiffons which were gathered in multicolored profusion about her lissome form, secured at strategic points by gem-faced catches. The music to which she danced, lithely and lasciviously, was raw and primitive. Charlotte knew by now that the original Oscar Wilde had written a play called *Salomé*. Forearmed by that knowledge, she quickly guessed what she was to watch.

As the virtual Salomé began the dance of the seven veils, the first impression Charlotte formed was that the dance was utterly artless. Modern dance, with all the artifice of contemporary biotechnology as a resource, was infinitely smoother and more complicated than *this*—but she judged that its primitive quality was deliberate. In the nineteenth century, Charlotte knew, there had been something called "pornography." Nowadays, in a world where most sexual intercourse took place in virtual reality, with the aid of clever machinery, the idea of pornography was redundant; everyone now accepted that in the realm of mechanized fantasy, nothing was perverse and nothing was taboo. Charlotte thought she understood, dimly, the historical implications of Salomé's silly prancing, but she found it neither stimulating nor instructive. The gradual removal of the veils was simply a laborious way of counting down to a climax she was already expecting. She waited for Salomé to acquire a mute partner for her mesmerized capering.

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The dancer *did* look as if she were mesmerized. She looked as if she were lost in some kind of dream, not really aware of who she was or what she was doing. Charlotte remembered that the young woman had given a similar impression during the brief glimpse of her that Gabriel King's cameras had caught. The dance slowed, and finally stopped. Salomé stood with bowed head for a few moments, and then reached out into the shadows that crowded around her, and brought out of the darkness a silver platter, on which sat the decapitated head of a man. Charlotte was not surprised, but she still flinched. The virtual head looked more startlingly real than a real head would probably have done, by virtue of the artistry which had gone into the design of its horror-stricken expression and the bloodiness of the crudely severed neck. She recognized the face which the virtual head wore: it was Gabriel King's.

The dancer plucked the head from its resting-place, entwining her delicate fingers in its hair. The salver disappeared, dissolved into the shadow. The dance began again.

How differently, Charlotte wondered, was Oscar Wilde seeing this ridiculous scene? Could he see it as something daring, monstrous and clever? Would he be able to sigh with satisfaction, in that irritating way of his, when the performance was over, and claim that Rappaccini was indeed a genius?

The macabre dance now seemed mechanical. The woman appeared to be unaware of the fact that she was supposedly brandishing a severed head. She moved its face close to her own, and then extended her arms again, maintaining the same distant and dreamy expression. Then the features of the severed head changed. It acquired an Oriental cast. Charlotte recognized Michi Urashima, and suddenly became interested again, eager for any hint of further change. She fixed her gaze steadfastly upon the horrid head. She had seen no picture of Paul Kwiatek, so she could only infer that the third appearance presented by the severed head was his, and she became even more intent when the third set of features blurred and shifted. The number and nature of the metamorphoses might well be crucial to the development of the investigation. She felt a surge of triumph as she realized that this revelation might vindicate her determination to stay with Oscar Wilde. She did not recognize the fourth face, but she was confident that the bubblebug set above her right eye would record it well enough for computer-aided recognition. How many more would there be?

The fifth face was darker than the fourth—naturally dark, she thought, not cosmetically melanized. She did not recognize this face, either, but she knew the sixth. She had seen it within the last few hours, looking considerably older and more ragged than its manifestation here, but unmistakably the same. It was Walter Czastka.

There was no seventh face. Salomé slowed in her paces, faced the sofa where Oscar and Charlotte sat watching, and took her bow. Then the lights came on. Charlotte had assumed that the performance was over, and its object attained, but she was wrong. What she had so far witnessed

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was merely a prelude. The lights that came on brought a new illusion, infinitely more spectacular than the last.

Charlotte had attended numerous theatrical displays employing clever holographic techniques, and knew well enough how a black-walled space which comprised no more than a few hundred cubic meters could be made to seem far greater, but she had never seen a virtual space as vast and as ornate as this. Here was the palace in which Salomé had danced, painted by a phantasmorgic imagination: a crazily vaulted ceiling higher than that in any reconstructed medieval cathedral, with elaborate stained-glass windows in mad profusion, offering all manner of fantastic scenes. Here was a polished floor three times the size of a sports-field, with a crowd of onlookers that must have numbered tens of thousands. But there was no sense of this being an actual *place:* it was an edifice born of nightmarish dreams, whose awesome and impossible dimensions weighed down upon a mere observer, reducing Charlotte in her own mind's eye to horrific insignificance.

Salomé, having bowed to the two watchers who had watched her dance at closer range than any of the fictitious multitude, turned to bow to another watcher: Herod, seated upon his throne. There had never been a throne like it in the entire history of empires and kingdoms; none but the most vainglorious of emperors could even have *imagined* it. It was huge and golden, hideously overburdened with silks and jewels, an appalling monstrosity of avaricious self-indulgence. It was, Charlotte knew, *intended* to appall. *All* of this was a calculated insult to the delicacy of effective illusion: a parody of grandiosity; an exercise in profusion for profusion's sake.

The king on the throne had drawn himself three times life-size, as a bloated, overdressed grotesque. The body was like nothing any longer to be seen in a world which had banished obesity four hundred years before, but the face, had it only been leaner, would have been the face which Rappaccini wore in the photographs that Hal Watson had shown her the day before. Oscar took her wrist in his hand and squeezed it. "Tread carefully," he whispered, his invisible lips no more than a centimeter from her ear. "This simulation may be programmed to tell us everything, if only we can question it cunningly enough."

Herod/Rappaccini burst into mocking laughter, his tumultuous flesh heaving. "Do you think that I have merely human ears, Oscar? You can hardly see yourselves, I know, but you are not hidden from *me.* Your friend is charming, Oscar, but she is not one of us. She is of an age that has forgotten and erased its past."

Mad, thought Charlotte. *Absolutely and irredeemably mad.* She wondered whether she might be in mortal danger, if the man beside her really was the secret designer of all of this.

"Moreau might have approved," Oscar said, off-handedly, "but his vision always outpaced his capacity for detail. Michi Urashima would not have been satisfied so easily, although I detect his handiwork in some

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of the effects. Did Gabriel King supply the organisms which hollowed out this Aladdin's cave, perchance?"

"He did," answered Rappaccini, squirming in his huge uncomfortable seat like a huge slug. "I have made art with his sadly utilitarian instruments. I have taken some trouble to weave the work of all my victims into the tapestry of their destruction."

"It's overdone," said Oscar, bluntly. "As a show of apparent madness, it is too excessive to be anything but pretense. Can we not talk as civilized men, since that is what we are?"

Rappaccini smiled. "That is why I wanted you here, dear Oscar," he said. "Only you could suspect me of cold rationality in the midst of all this. But you understand civilization far too well to wear its gifts unthinkingly. You may well be the only man alive who understands the world's decadence. Have the patient bureaucrats of the United Nations Police Force discovered my true name yet?"

"No," said Oscar.

"We soon will," Charlotte interposed, defiantly. The sim turned its bloodshot eye upon her, and she flinched from the baleful stare.

"The final act has yet to be played," Rappaccini told her. "You may already know my true names, but you will have difficulty in identifying the one which I presently use as my own." The sardonic gaze moved again, to meet Oscar's invisible stare. "You will thank me for this, Oscar. You would never forgive me if I were not just a little *too* clever for you."

"If you wanted to kill six men," said Oscar, "why did you wait until they were almost dead? At any time in the last seventy years, fate might have cheated you. Had you waited another month, you might not have found Walter Czastka alive."

"You underestimate the tenacity of men like these," Rappaccini replied. "You think they are ready for death because they have ceased to live, but longevity has ingrained its habits deeply in the flesh. Without me to help them, they might have protracted their misery for many years yet. But I am nothing if not loyal to those deserving of my tenderness. I bring them not merely death, but glorious transfiguration! The *fact* of death is not the point at issue here. Did you think me capable of pursuing mere revenge? It is the *manner* of a man's death that is all-important in our day and age, is it not? We have rediscovered the ancient joys of mourning, and the awesome propriety of solemn ceremony and dark symbol. Wreaths are not enough—not even wreaths which are spiders in disguise. The end of death *itself* is upon us, and how shall we celebrate it, save by making a new compact with the Grim Reaper? Murder is almost extinct, and it should *not* be. Murder must be rehabilitated, made romantic, flamboyant, gorgeous, and glamorous! What have my six victims left to do but set an example to their younger brethren? And who but *I* should appoint himself their deliverer, their ennobler, the proclaimer of their fame?"

"I fear," said Oscar, coldly, "that this performance might not make the impact that you intend. It reeks of falsity."

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Rappaccini smiled again. "You know better than that, Oscar," he said. "You know in your heart that this marvelous appearance is real, and the hidden actuality a mere nothing. This is no cocoon of hollowed rock; it is my palace. You will see a finer rock before the end."

"Your representations are deceptive, Dr. Rappaccini," Charlotte put in. "Your daughter showed us Gabriel King's head first and foremost, but Kwiatek died before him, and Teidemann was probably dead even before Kwiatek. It was optimistic, too—we've already warned Walter Czastka, and if the other one can still be saved, we'll save him too."

Rappaccini's sim turned back to her. She had not been able to deduce, so far, how high a grade of artificial intelligence it had. She did not expect any explicit confirmation of her guess that Magnus Teidemann was a victim, or that the woman really was Rappaccini's daughter, but she felt obliged to try.

"All six will go to their appointed doom," the sim told her.

She wanted to get out now, to transmit a tape of this encounter to Hal Watson, so that he could identify the fifth face, but she hesitated.

"What can these men possibly have done to you?" she asked, trying to sound contemptuous although there was no point. "What unites them in your hatred?"

"I do not hate them at all," replied the sim, "and the link between them is not recorded in that silly Net which was built to trap the essence of human experience. I have done what I have done because it was absurd and unthinkable and comical. Great lies have been banished from the world for far too long, and the time has come for us not merely to tell them, but to *live* them also. It is by no means easy to work against the grain of synthetic wood, but we must try."

And with that, darkness fell, lit only by the tiny star which marked the door through which they had entered the Underworld.

9

Night had fallen by the time Charlotte and Oscar emerged into the open, but there was a three-quarter moon and the stars shone very brightly through the clear, clean air. The car had gone. Charlotte's hand tightened around the bubblebugs which she had carefully removed from their stations above her eyebrows. She had been holding them at the ready, anxious to plug them into the car's systems so that their data could be decanted and relayed back to Hal Watson. She murmured a curse.

"Don't worry," said Oscar, who had come out behind her. "Rappaccini will not abandon us. A vehicle of some kind will be along very shortly to carry us on our way."

"Where to?" she asked, unable to keep the asperity out of her voice.

"Westward. We may have one more port of call *en route,* but our final

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destination will surely be the island where Walter Czastka is. His death is intended to form the climactic scene of this little drama."

"Let's hope it's not too late to prevent that," said Charlotte bitterly. "And let's hope the fifth man is still alive when we get a chance to find out who he is. He may be dead already, of course—your ghoulish friend displayed his victims in the order in which their bodies were discovered, not the order in which they were killed."

"He was never my friend," Oscar objected, "and I am not sure that I like his determination to involve me in this. There is an element of mockery in it."

"Mockery," she said, tersely, "isn't a crime. Murder *is.*" She took out her waistphone and tried to send a signal. There was a chance that the power-cell had enough muscle to reach a relay-station. Nothing happened. She turned back to her enigmatic companion.

"Did you understand all that stuff?" she asked him, point-blank.

"I think so," Oscar admitted. "My ancient namesake's *Salomé* provided the format, but the set owed more to Gustave Moreau's paintings than Oscar Wilde's humble play. . . ." He broke off. His words had gradually been overlaid by another sound, whose monotonous drone now threatened to drown him out entirely.

"There!" said Charlotte, pointing at a shadow eclipsing the stars. It was descending rapidly toward them, growing hugely as it did so. It was a VTOL airplane, whose engines were even now switching to the vertical mode so that it could land helicopter-fashion. Charlotte and Oscar hurried into the shelter of the building from which they had come, to give it space to land.

The plane had only an AI pilot. While Oscar climbed in behind her Charlotte plugged her waistphone into the comcon and deposited her bubblebugs in the decoder. "Hal," she said, as soon as the connection was made. "Data coming in: crazy message from Rappaccini, delivered by sim. Conclusive proof of Rappaccini's involvement. Pick out the face of the fifth victim and identify it. Send an urgent warning to Walter Czastka. And tell us what course this damn plane is following, when you can track it." The plane had already taken off again.

Hal acknowledged, but paused only briefly before saying: "I'm sure all this is very interesting, but I've closed the file on Rappaccini. We're concentrating all our efforts on the woman."

"What?" said Charlotte, dumbfounded. "What do you mean, *closed the file?* The tape is proof of Rappaccini's involvement. Have you found out his real name?" Hal was too busy decanting the data and setting up programs to deal with it; there was a frustrating pause. Charlotte looked around. The airplane was a small one, built to carry a maximum of four passengers; there was a second comcon and a second pair of seats behind the one into which she and Oscar had climbed. Behind the second row of seats there was a curtained section containing four bunks. Oscar was busy inspecting the menu on the food-dispenser, frowning.

"It all depends what you mean by a *real name,*" said Hal, finally. "He

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really was born Jafri Biasiolo. The dearth of information about Biasiolo is the result of poor data-gathering toward the end of the Aftermath. After his first rejuvenation—which changed his appearance to the one that we saw earlier—he began to use the name Rappaccini for all purposes. Later, as he approached his second rejuve, he established half a dozen fake identities under various pseudonyms, including Gustave Moreau. After the rejuve, when he had his appearance considerably modified again, he began using the Moreau name as a primary, and Rappaccini became exclusively virtual. Moreau leased an islet west of Kauai, where he's spent most of the last twenty-five years, never leaving for more than four or five weeks at a time. There's no evident connection between Moreau and the victims, except that Walter Czastka's his nearest neighbor. So far as we know, Biasiolo never had any connection with the university at Wollongong."

"I don't understand," said Charlotte. "Surely we have enough to arrest Moreau, with all the stuff I've just sent through. Why close the file?"

"Because he's *dead,*" Hal replied, smugly. "Ten weeks ago in Honolulu. Details of his birth might be lost in the mists of obscurity, but every detail of his death was scrupulously recorded. There's no doubt that it was him. The comcon links to his island were closed down before that—he's been shipping equipment and material back to Kauai for over a year. There's nothing there now except the ecosystem which he built. The island's off-limits until the UN can get an inspection team in."

"But he's still *responsible* for all this," Charlotte protested. "He must have set it all up before he died. He and the girl—his daughter."

"Moreau never had a daughter in any of his incarnations. He was sterilized before his first rejuve—even though it wasn't actually a legal requirement back then, it was a point of political principle. He made the customary deposits in a reputable sperm bank, but they've never been touched."

"Oh, come *on,* Hal! He's a top-class genetic engineer—his sterilization doesn't mean a thing. Look at the tape. She's playing Salomé to his Herod!"

"That's not *evidence,*" said Hal, sharply. "Anyhow, the exact relationship of the girl to Moreau is neither here nor there. The point is that *she's* the active mover in all this. She's the only one we can put on trial, and she's the one we need to find before the newscasters start billing this mess as the Crime of the Century. If there's any *real* help you can give me, I'd be grateful, but all this theatrical stuff is just more newsfodder, which we can do without. Okay?"

Charlotte could understand why Hal was edgy. News of how Gabriel King and the others had died must have leaked out, and he was very sensitive about cases being publicized before arrests had been made. It wasn't his image or his reputation within the department that he was worried about; it was a point of principle, a private obsession.

"We *are* helping, aren't we?" she whispered, after the inset had disappeared. The question, by necessity, was addressed to Oscar Wilde.

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"He won't find her before we do," Oscar said softly. "We've been given the fast track to the climax of the psychodrama. And she *is* his daughter—if not a literal daughter, then a figurative one. I see now why the simulacrum said that we'd have difficulty identifying his true name. Moreau was his *true* name, by then, but he knew that the coincidence would make me assume that it was a mere pseudonym. I must talk to Walter again."

Before he could touch the keyboard, however, another call came in.

"The fifth face is Stuart McCandless," said Hal's voice. "We've spoken to him once but we're trying to get through to him again; his house AI's sent out a summoner. Your plane's heading west, on course for Kauai. You might be able to speak to him in person soon."

Charlotte placed her fingers on the rim of the keyboard, but Oscar put his hand on top of hers, gently insistent. "I have to call Walter," he said. "Dr. Watson will have priority on the call to McCandless."

She let him go ahead, although she knew that she shouldn't let her authority slip away so easily. She, after all, was the investigator. She no longer thought that Oscar was a murderer, but that didn't affect the fact that *he* was the one who was only along for the ride.

Oscar's call was fielded by a sim, which looked considerably healthier than the real Walter had. "Oscar Wilde," he said, curtly. "I need to talk to Walter urgently."

"I'm not taking any calls at present," said the simulacrum, flatly.

"Don't be ridiculous, Walter," said Oscar, impatiently. "This is no time to go into a sulk."

The sim flickered, and its image was replaced by Czastka's actual face. "What do you want?" he said, his voice taut with aggravation.

"You're a player in this game whether you like it or not, Walter," Oscar said, soothingly. "We really do have to try to figure it out."

"I'm not in any danger," said Walter, tiredly. "There's no one else on the island, and no one can land without the house systems knowing about it. I'm perfectly safe. I never heard of anyone called Biasiolo, I've never met Moreau, and I know of no connection between myself and the other names the police gave me that could possibly constitute a motive for murder."

"I don't think the motive is conventional," said Oscar. "This whole business is a publicity stunt, a weird artistic statement, but there must be *some* kind of connection—something that happened at Wollongong."

Czastka looked ominously pale. "I told your friends, Oscar—*I don't remember.* Nobody remembers what they were doing a hundred and thirty years ago. *Nobody.*"

"I don't believe that, Walter," said Oscar, softly. "We forget almost everything, but we can always remember the things which matter most, if we try hard enough. This is something which *matters,* Walter. It matters now, and it mattered then. If you try, you can remember."

"I *can't.*" The word was delivered with such bitterness and anguish that Charlotte flinched.

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"What about you and Gustave Moreau, Walter?" Oscar asked. "Didn't you know he was your neighbor?"

"I've never even *seen* the man," said Czastka. "All I know about him is the joke the wise guys on Kauai keep repeating. The island of Dr. Moreau, get it? You must—you've probably even *read* the damn thing. You must know, too, that we keep ourselves to ourselves out here. All I want is to keep to myself. *I just want to be left alone.*"

Oscar paused for thought. "Do you *want* to die, Walter?" he asked, finally. His inflection suggested that it was not a rhetorical question.

"No," said Czastka, sourly. "I want to live forever, just like you. I want to be young again, just like you. But when I do die, I don't want flowers by Rappaccini at my funeral, and I don't want anything of yours. When I die, I want all the flowers to be mine. Is that clear?"

"I think we're on our way to see you," said Oscar, placidly. "We can talk then."

"Damn you, Wilde," said the old man, vehemently. "I don't want you on my island. You stay away, you hear? *Stay away!*" He broke the connection without waiting for any response.

Oscar turned sideways to look at Charlotte. His face looked slightly sinister in the dim light of the helicopter's cabin. "Your turn," he said. His smile was very faint.

It didn't take as long to get through as Charlotte had expected. Evidently, whoever had called on Hal's behalf had been brisk and businesslike. Stuart McCandless wasn't answering his phone in person, but when Charlotte fed his sim her authority codes it summoned him without delay.

"Yes?" he said, his dark and well-worn face peering at her with slightly peevish surprise. "I've hardly begun on the data you people dumped into my system. It's going to take some time to look at it all."

"I'm Charlotte Holmes, Dr. McCandless," she said. "I'm in an airplane that has apparently been programmed by Gustave Moreau, *alias* Rappaccini. He seems intent on providing my companion—Oscar Wilde—with a good seat from which to observe this unfolding melodrama. We're heading out into the ocean from the American coast. We're heading your way and I thought we ought to talk. Have you ever met Moreau?"

McCandless shook his head vigorously. "I've already answered these questions," he said, irritably.

"Have you looked at the tapes of the girl who visited Gabriel King and Michi Urashima? Do you recognize her?"

"I'd be able to study your tapes more closely if you'd allow me time to do it, Ms. Holmes. I'm looking at them now, but in these days of changing appearances it's almost impossible to recognize *anyone*. I don't know whether the person in those pictures is twenty years old or a hundred. I've had dozens of students who were similar enough to be able to duplicate her appearance with a little effort. There's a visitor here now who could only need a little elementary remodeling."

Charlotte felt Oscar Wilde's hand fall upon hers, but she didn't need

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the hint. She was already trying to work out how to phrase the next question. "Who is your visitor, Dr. McCandless?" she asked, in the end.

"Oh, there's not the slightest need to worry," McCandless replied. "I've known her for some time. Her name is Julia Herold. I told your colleague in New York all about her."

"Could you ask her to come to the phone?" asked Charlotte. She glanced sideways, very briefly, at Oscar.

"Oh, very well," McCandless said. He turned away, saying, "Julia?"

Moments later he moved aside, surrendering his place in front of the camera to a young woman, apparently in her early twenties. The woman stared into the camera. Her abundant hair was golden red, and very carefully sculptured, and her eyes were a vivid green. *A wig and a bimolecular overlay,* Charlotte thought. "I'm sorry to disturb you, Miss Herold," she said, slowly. "We're investigating a series of murders, and it's difficult to determine what information may be relevant."

"I understand," said the woman, calmly.

Charlotte felt a strange pricking sensation at the back of her neck. *It's her,* she thought. *It has to be her.* Hal Watson was undoubtedly checking the woman out at this very moment, with all possible speed, and if he found anything to justify action, he would act swiftly—but until he did, there was nothing she could do. *She's playing with us,* Charlotte thought. *She has McCandless in the palm of her hand and there's no way we can save him. But she'll never get away. She can't make another move without our knowing about it.*

"May I talk to Dr. McCandless again?" she asked, dully.

They switched places again. Charlotte wanted to say *Whatever you do, don't kiss her!* but she knew how stupid it would sound. "Dr. McCandless," she said, uncomfortably, "we think that something might have happened when you were a student yourself. Something that links you, however tenuously, with Gabriel King, Michi Urashima, Paul Kwiatek, Magnus Teidemann, and Walter Czastka. We desperately need to know what it was. We understand how difficult it is to remember, but . . ."

McCandless controlled his irritation. "I'm checking back through my records, trying to turn something up," he said. "I hardly know Czastka, although he lives close by. The others I know only by repute. I didn't even know that I was contemporary with Urashima or Teidemann. There were thousands of students at the university. We didn't all graduate in the same year. We were never in the same place at one time, unless. . . ."

"Unless what, Dr. McCandless?" said Charlotte, quickly.

The dark brow was furrowed and the eyes were glazed, as the man reached for some fleeting, fugitive memory. "The beach party . . . ?" he muttered. Then, the face became hard and stern again. "No," he said, firmly. "I really can't remember."

Charlotte saw a slender hand descend reassuringly upon Stuart McCandless's shoulder, and she saw him take it in his own, thankfully. She knew that there was no point in asking what he had half-remembered. He was shutting her out.

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It's happening now, she thought, *before our very eyes. She's going to kill him within the next few minutes, and we can't do a thing to stop it. But we can surely stop her before she gets to Walter Czastka.*

"Dr. McCandless," she said, desperately. "I have reason to believe that you're in mortal danger. I advise you to isolate yourself completely—and I mean *completely,* Dr. McCandless."

"I know what you mean," he retorted testily. "I know how the mind of a policeman works. But I can give you my absolute assurance that I'm in no danger whatsoever. Now, may I get on with the work that your colleague asked me to do?"

"Yes," she said. "I'm sorry." She let him break the connection; she didn't feel that she could do it herself.

When the screen blanked, she turned and said: "He's as good as dead, isn't he?"

"The seeds may already be taking root in his flesh," said Oscar, gently. "It might have been too late, no matter what anyone could have said or done."

"What was it that he started to say?" she asked. "And why did he stop?"

"Something that came to mind in spite of his resistance. Something, perhaps, that Walter might half-remember too, if only he wanted to. . . ."

Charlotte shook her head, tiredly. She called Hal. "Julia Herold," she said, shortly. "Have you tied her in with Moreau yet?"

"No," said Hal, simply. "She's a student. Her career seems quite ordinary, all in order. According to the Net, she wasn't in New York when Gabriel King received his visitor, nor in San Francisco when Urashima was infected. I'm double-checking—if it's disinformation, I'll get through it in a matter of hours."

"She was there," said Charlotte. "Whatever the superficial data-flow says, she was there. It's all in place, Hal—everything except the reason. You've got to stop her leaving the island. Whatever else happens, you mustn't let her get to Czastka."

"Who's her father?" Oscar put in. "Whose child is she?"

"Egg and sperm were taken from the banks," said Hal. "Both donors long-dead. Six co-parents filed the application—no traceable link to anyone involved in this. The sperm was logged in the name of Lothar Kjeldsen, born 2355, died 2417. The ovum was Maria Inacio's, born 2402, died 2423. No duplicate pairing registered, no other posthumous offspring registered to either parent. I'm checking for disinformation input, in case the entire Herold identity is virtual."

"The mother was born at the same time as the men on the victim list. Could she have known them?"

"It's possible. She was an Australian resident at the appropriate time. There's no trace of her in the University records, but she might have been living next door. What would it prove if she was? She's been dead for a hundred and thirty years. She drowned in Honolulu—presumed

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accidental, possibly a suicide. This isn't getting us anywhere, Dr. Wilde, and I have a whole panel lighting up on me—I'm cutting off."

The screen went blank yet again.

"She's Rappaccini's daughter," said Oscar, softly. "I don't know which bit of the record's been faked, or how, but she's Rappaccini's daughter. And she'll get to Walter, even if she has to swim."

10

Charlotte stared out of the viewport beside her. Behind them, in the east, the dawn was breaking. Ahead of them, in the west, the sky was still dark and ominous. Beneath them, the sea was only just becoming visible as fugitive rays of silvery light caught the tops of lazy waves. In these latitudes, the sea was almost unpolluted by the vast amount of synthetic photosynthetic substances which were daily pumped out from the artificial islands of the Timor Sea; even by day it did not display the defiant greenness of Liquid Artificial Photosynthesis. Even so, this region of the ocean could not be reckoned a marine wilderness. The so-called seven seas were a single vast system, now half-gentled by the hand of man. The Continental Engineers, despite the implications of their name, had better control of evolution's womb than extinction's rack. Even the wrathful volcanoes which had created the Hawaiian islands were now sufficiently manipulable that they could be forced to yield upon demand the little virgin territories which the likes of Walter Czastka and Oscar Wilde had rented for their experiments in Creation.

"In my namesake's novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray,*" Oscar said, ruminatively, "the eponymous anti-hero made a diabolical bargain, exchanging fates with a portrait of himself, with the consequence that his picture was marred by all the afflictions of age and dissolution while the real Dorian remained perpetually young. He cast aside all conventional ideas of morality, determined to savor the entire gamut of pleasurable sensation."

"I'm sure it's great fun," said Charlotte, ironically.

Oscar ignored the remark. "At that time, of course," he said, "the story of Dorian Gray was the purest of fantasies, but we live in a different era now. It is perhaps too early to declare that yours is the last generation which will be subject to the curse of aging, but I am living proof of the fact that even *my* generation has set aside much of the burden with which ugliness, disease, and the aging process afflicted us in days of old. We are corruptible, but we also have the means to set aside corruption, to reassert, in spite of all the ravages of time and malady, the image which we would like to have of ourselves. Nowadays, everyone who has the means may have beauty, and even those of limited means have a right of access to the elementary technologies of rejuvenation. I am young now for the fourth time, and no matter how often doctors and doubters tell me that my flesh is too weak to weather a fourth rejuvenation, I will

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not be prevented from attempting it. Nothing will induce me to become like Walter Czastka when I might instead gamble my mortality against the chance of yet another draught from the fountain of youth."

"So what?" said Charlotte. "Why tell me?"

"Because," he said, tolerantly, "that's why Rappaccini expects me to understand what sort of artwork he is designing. That's why he expects me to become its interpreter and champion, explaining to the world what it is that he has done. Because I'm Oscar Wilde—and because I'm Dorian Gray. Men like the first Oscar Wilde and the first Gustave Moreau were fond of likening their own era to the days of the declining Roman Empire, when its aristocracy had grown effete and self-indulgent, so utterly enervated by luxury that its members could find stimulation only in orgiastic excess. They argued that the ruling class of the nineteenth century had been similarly corrupted by comfort, to the extent that anyone among them who had any sensitivity at all lived under the yoke of a terrible *ennui,* which could only be opposed by sensual and imaginative excess. All that remained for men of genius to do was mock the meaningless of conformity and enjoy the self-destructive exultation of moral and artistic defiance.

"They were right, of course. Theirs *was* a decadent culture, absurdly distracted by its luxuries and vanities, unwittingly lurching toward its historical terminus. The 'comforts' of the nineteenth century—hygiene, medicine, electricity—were the direct progenitors of what we now call the Devastation. Few men had the vision to understand what was happening, and even fewer had the capacity to care. Addicted to their luxuries as they were, even terror could not give them foresight. Blindly and stupidly, they laid the world to waste, and used all the good intentions of their marvelous technology to pave themselves a road to Hell. In the Aftermath, of course, the work of renewal began. Collective control of fertility was achieved, and the old world of hateful tribes was replaced by the world of the Net, which bound the entire human race into a single community. And we were able once again to cultivate our comforts . . . to the extent that Rappaccini seemingly believes that the revolution is complete, and that the wheel has come full circle."

"But that's nonsense!" said Charlotte. "There's no way that there could be another Devastation. There couldn't possibly be another population explosion, or another plague war."

"That's not what Rappaccini fears," said Oscar. "What he's trying to make us see, I think, is the horror of a world inhabited entirely by the *old:* a world made stagnant by the dominion of minds that have lost their grip on memory and imagination alike, becoming slaves to habit, imprisoned by their own narrow horizons. He's telling us that, in one way or another, we must kill our old men. The argument of his artwork is that if we can't liberate our renewable bodies from the frailty of our mortal minds, then the technological conquest of death will be a tragedy and not a triumph. He has undertaken to murder six men who are nearing a hundred and fifty years of age, not one of whom has dared to risk

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a third rejuvenation, even though it would seem that they have little or nothing to lose—and he has chosen for his audience a man who *has* taken that gamble, hopefully soon enough to avoid the kind of mental sclerosis which has claimed his victims. Can you begin to see what he's about?"

"I can see that he's stark, staring mad," said Charlotte.

Oscar smiled wryly. "Perhaps he is," he said. "His fear is real enough—but perhaps the threat isn't as overwhelming as he seems to think. Perhaps the *old* men will never take over the world, no matter how many they are or how old they grow. Old age is, after all, self-defeating. Those who lose the ability to live also lose the will to live. But the creative spark can be maintained, if it's properly nurtured. The victory of *ennui* isn't inevitable. If and when we really can transform every human egg-cell to equip it for eternal physical youth, those children will discover ways to adapt themselves to that condition by cultivating eternal *mental* youth. My way of trying to do that is, I admit, primitive—but I am here to help prepare the way for those who come after me. They will be the true children of our race: the first truly *human* beings."

Charlotte felt her eyes growing heavy; she felt drained. If only she had been more alert, she thought, she might have obtained a firmer grasp on Oscar Wilde's arguments. After all, she too retained an echo of the 1890s in her name. Could the small phonetic step which separated "Charlotte" from "Sherlock" really signify such a vast abyss of incomprehension? She knew that she needed sleep, and she felt in need of a soporific. Unfortunately, she was four thousand kilometers away from the ingenious resources of her intimate technology. She looked uncertainly at Oscar Wilde. He was watching her, with a serious expression in his liquid, luminous eyes.

"We ought to get some sleep," Charlotte said. "It'll be late tomorrow before we get to Hawaii." She hesitated, wondering how to proceed, her gaze drifting to the curtain which screened the cabin's bunkspace.

"How my namesake's heart would have warmed to our Virtual Realities and the wonders of our intimate technology!" Oscar said, as though continuing his reverie. "I fear, though, that we have not yet learned to use our intimate technologies as fully or as consciencelessly as we might. Even in a world of artificial wombs and long-dead parents, we cling to the notion that sexual intercourse is essentially a form of communication, or even communion, rather than an entirely personal matter, whose true milieu is the arena of fantasy, where all idiosyncrasies may be safely unfettered."

Charlotte couldn't help blushing, although she presumed that he had pre-empted her proposition mainly in order to spare her blushes.

"Thanks for telling me," she said, sharply. "I suppose that if Rappaccini had you on his list of victims, you'd be in no danger."

"Not so," he said. "A kiss is, after all, just a kiss—and I can appreciate

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a lovely face as well as any man. It is only in matters of *true* passion that I am an exclusive and unrepentant Narcissus."

11

When Charlotte awoke, the sun was high, but Oscar had darkened the viewports in order to conserve a soft crepuscular light within the cabin of the speeding plane. She sat up and drew the curtain aside to look over the backs of the seats. Her waistphone was still plugged in to the comcon; data was parading across the main screen at the command of Oscar's deft fingertips.

"Good morning," he said, instantly aware of her movement although he had not turned. "It *is* still morning, thanks to the time-harvesting effects of westward travel. We're less than half an hour from Kauai, but I fear that we'll be unable to do much there except bear witness to the completion of the fifth phase of Rappaccini's grand plan."

Because she was slightly befuddled by sleep, it took her a second or two to work out what he meant. "McCandless is dead!" she said, finally.

"Quite dead," he confirmed. "The local police had him removed to an intensive-care unit as soon as he showed signs of illness, but there was absolutely nothing to be done for him. The progress of his devourers will be tracked with infinite patience by a multitude of observers—the doctors have sent a fleet of nanocameras into his tissues—but to no avail. What remains of Teidemann's body has been found too."

Charlotte donned the tunic of her police uniform. "What about Julia Herold? Have they got her in custody?"

"Alas, no."

Charlotte knew that she ought to have been astonished and outraged, but all that she really felt was a sense of bitter resignation.

"How could they possibly fail to intercept her?"

"She had already left when McCandless began to show signs of distress," said Oscar, who did not seem overly disappointed. "She went for a moonlight swim, and never surfaced again. The eyes set to follow her were mounted on flitterbugs, and by the time suitable submarine eyes entered the water she was beyond reach. Flying eyes are, of course, watching avidly for her to surface, but she must have had breathing apparatus secreted off-shore, and some kind of mechanized transport."

"A submarine?" said Charlotte, incredulously.

"More likely a towing device of some kind. The officer in charge of the failed operation pointed out that there was little more he could have done without a warrant for her arrest. One has now been issued. The Kauai police have sent helicopters to lie in wait for her, but Walter has forbidden them permission to land, and they're not empowered to override his wishes unless and until they actually see her. There's one more police helicopter awaiting our arrival on Kauai."

"Have you talked to Czastka?"

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"No. He's refusing all calls. He presumably still thinks that all he needs to do is keep his house sealed. 'Julia Herold,' by the way, is a fiction of disinformation. Your Dr. Watson has proved that the person in McCandless' house was indeed the same one who visited Gabriel King in New York and Michi Urashima in San Francisco. He is confident that he will be able to prove that she delivered the fatal flowers to Teidemann and Kwiatek too. He assures me that it is only a matter of time before he discloses an authentic personal history."

"Is that everything?"

"By no means. It required all my skills as an organizer to present these edited highlights so economically."

Charlotte looked resentfully at the bright and beautiful young man, who seemed unafflicted by the least sign of weariness. She switched the nearest viewport to reflector mode so that she could straighten her hair, and studied the faint wrinkles that were becoming apparent in the corners of her eyes. They could be removed easily enough by the most elementary tissue-manipulation, but they still served as a reminder of the biological clock that was ticking away inside her. *Thirty years to rejuve number one,* she thought, *and counting.* It was not a kind of paranoia to which she was usually prone, but she could not help comparing her flawed features with Oscar's fully-restored perfection.

As soon as they had set down at the Kauai heliport, Charlotte opened the door, and leapt down to the blue plastic apron. The promised helicopter was waiting less than a hundred meters away. Its police markings were a delight to her eyes, holding the promise of *control.* From now on she would no longer be a passenger but an active participant; a pursuer, an active instrument of justice. Oscar kept pace with her in spite of the fact that his gait seemed much lazier.

"I should leave you here," she said, while climbing aboard. "I can, you know—this isn't public transport."

"You wouldn't be so cruel," he said. He was right.

The helicopter lifted as soon as they were strapped in. Charlotte reached into the equipment-locker under the seat, and brought forth a handgun. She checked the mechanism before clipping it to her belt.

"You're not thinking of using that, I hope?" said Oscar.

"Now the proof's in place," Charlotte answered, tautly, "I can employ any practical measure which may be necessary to apprehend her. The bullets are non-lethal. We're the *police,* remember."

They were traveling at a slower speed than they had previously, but flew so low that their progress seemed more rapid. The downdraft of their blades carved the roiling waves into all manner of curious shapes. High in the sky above them, a silver airship was making its stately progress from Honolulu to Yokohama. Oscar tuned in a broadcast news report. There were pictures of Gabriel King's skeleton, neatly entwined with winding stems bearing black flowers in horrid profusion. This was only the beginning; the AI voice-over promised that details of several more murders would soon be revealed. Charlotte knew that an operation

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of the size that was now being mounted would attract the attention of half the newshawks in United America and a good few in not-very-united Eastasia. Flocks of flying eyes would be migrating this way from every direction. The privacy which Walter Czastka so passionately desired to conserve was about to be rudely shattered.

Oscar blanked the newscast as soon as it moved on to more mundane matters, and his fingers punched out Walter Czastka's telephone code. The AI sim which answered had clearly been reprogrammed since Charlotte had last seen it.

"Damn you, Oscar Wilde," it said, without bothering with any conventional identification or polite preliminary. "Damn you and Rappaccini to the darkest oblivion imaginable."

Charlotte turned the camera-eye so that her own image filled the viewfield. "Dr. Czastka," she said, "this is Charlotte Holmes of the UN Police. I need to speak to you, urgently."

"Damn you, Oscar Wilde," replied the sim, stubbornly. "Damn you and Rappaccini to the darkest oblivion imaginable."

Charlotte looked at Oscar, whose face had creased into an anxious frown. "I have a horrible suspicion," he said, "that we might be too late." Charlotte looked at her wristwatch. They were still twenty minutes away from the island. She punched in another code, connecting herself to the commander of the task-force that had surrounded it.

"What's happening?" she demanded.

"No sign of her yet," the answer came back. "If anything happens, Inspector, you'll be the first to know." There was nothing to do but wait, so she sat back in her seat and stared down at the agitated waves. They were still a few minutes away when the voice came back on line. "We have camera-contact," it said. "Relaying pictures."

The screen showed a female figure in a humpbacked wetsuit walking out of the sea, looking for all the world as if she were enjoying a leisurely stroll. She paused at the high tide line to remove the suit and its built-in paralung, then knelt beside the discarded wetsuit and removed something from a inner pocket. Over the voice-link they could hear the officer who had spoken to them instructing her to desist.

Suddenly, the air around the girl was filled by a dense smoke, which swirled in the breeze as it dispersed.

"Alate spores," Oscar guessed. "Millions of them."

Julia Herold stood, with her arms upraised in a gesture of seeming surrender. She had apparently done what she'd come to do.

"Stay in the copters," Charlotte instructed. "The stuff she's released is probably harmless to anyone but Czastka, but there's no need for everyone to take the risk. I'll pick her up myself."

"As you wish," said the other officer, sourly. He evidently thought that Charlotte was intent on appropriating what little glory there might be in making the arrest.

"I think we may have mistaken the exact form that the final murder was intended to take," said Oscar, quietly. "It's not Walter those spores

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are after—it's his ecosystem. She came here to destroy his private Creation."

As the helicopter swept in to land Charlotte scanned the trees which fringed the beach. Lush undergrowth nestled about the boles of palmlike trees. She half-expected to see the green leaves already flecked with darker colors, but nothing was happening yet.

"Nothing can stop it," said Oscar, softly, his voice reduced now almost to a whisper. "Each murder is one hundred percent specific to its victim. Walter's own body is safe inside the house, but that's not what he cares about . . . it's not what he *is*. Rappaccini's instruments are going to devour his entire ecosphere—every last molecule."

For the first time, Charlotte realized, Oscar Wilde was genuinely horrified. The equanimity that had hardly been rippled by the sight of Gabriel King's hideously embellished skeleton was ruffled now. For the first time, Oscar was identifying with one of Rappaccini's victims, seeing Rappaccini as a criminal as well as an artist. But even as Charlotte observed his outrage, Oscar's expression was changing.

"Look!" he said. "Look what kind of demi-Eden Walter Czastka has been endeavoring to build here." The helicopter had set down some thirty meters from the woman, who still stood there, with her arms upraised. She was taking no notice of them or the other hovering machines; her green eyes were quite blank. Charlotte climbed down, keeping one eye on the woman while she obeyed Oscar's instruction to look inland. She could not see anything surprising or alarming.

"Poor Walter!" said Oscar, sadly. "What a petty Arcadia this is! Immature and incomplete though it undoubtedly is, its limitations already show. Here is the work of a hack trying desperately to exceed his own potential—but here is the work of a man who has not even the imagination of blind and stupid nature. I can see now why Walter tried to keep me away. The mysterious Julia does not have to kiss poor Walter, because Walter is already dead, and he knows it. Even if his heart still beats within his withered frame, he is dead. Rappaccini's worms are feeding on his carcass."

"It looks perfectly ordinary to me," said Charlotte, staring up at the uneven line made by the crowns of Walter Czastka's palmlike trees, as they extended their ample canopies to bask in the life-giving light of the sun.

"Precisely," said Oscar Wilde, with a heavy sigh.

Charlotte moved to confront the woman, who stood statue-still, looking up into the brilliant blue sky.

"Julia Herold," she began, "I arrest you for . . ."

She heard a strange squawking sound behind her, and guessed that someone was trying to attract her attention by shouting over the voice-link to the helicopter's comcon. She picked up her waistphone impatiently. "It's okay," she said. "I've got her. It's all over."

"Look behind you!" said the voice from the other end, trying to shout

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at her although the volume control on her waistphone compensated automatically. *"Corrosion and corruption, woman, look behind you!"*

Uncomprehendingly, Charlotte looked behind her.

Falling toward her from the vivid brightness of the early afternoon sun was a black shadow. At first she could judge neither its size nor its shape, but as it swooped down, the truth became abundantly and monstrously clear. She could not believe the evidence of her eyes. She knew full well that what she was seeing was flatly impossible, and her mind stubbornly refused to accept the truth of what she saw.

It was a bird, but it was a bird like none that had ever taken to the skies of earth in the entire evolutionary history of flight, bigger by far than the helicopters whose automatic pilots were taking evasive action to avoid it. The pinion-feathers of its black wings were the size of samurai swords, and its horrible head was naked, like a vulture's. Its beak was agape, and it cried out as it swooped down upon her. Its cry was a terrible inhuman shriek, which made her think of the wailing of the damned in some Dantean Hell.

Wise panic took hold of her and threw her aside like a rag doll, lest she be struck by the diving impossibility. She had no time to fire her gun, nor even to think about firing it. Her reflexes rudely cast her down, tumbling her ignominiously onto the silvery sand.

Julia Herold didn't move a muscle. Charlotte understood, belatedly, that the raising of her arms was not a gesture of surrender at all. With confident ease, the girl interlaced her fingers with the reaching talons of the huge bird, and was lifted instantly from her feet.

According to all the best authorities, Charlotte knew, no bird could lift an adult human being from the ground—but *this* bird could. It was climbing again now, beating its fabulous night-black wings with extravagant majesty, circling back into the dazzling halo of brilliance that surrounded the tropical sun.

Charlotte reached up her own hand to take the one that Oscar Wilde was extending to her. "Do you remember when Rappaccini's simulacrum said to us, 'This is no cocoon of hollowed rock; it is my palace. You will see a finer rock before the end'?" he asked, resignedly. "The second 'rock' was actually 'roc.' A cheap shot, in *my* judgment."

"Get back in the helicopter," she said, grimly. "I don't know how far or how fast that thing can fly, but she is *not* going to get away."

"I don't think she's even trying," said Oscar, with a sigh. "She's merely escorting us to the much-joked-about island of Dr. Moreau, so that we may cast a critical eye over her father's Creation."

12

Moreau's island was more or less identical in size and shape to Walter Czastka's. By the time it was in view, Charlotte had Hal Watson on the

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line, watching the drunken flight of the giant bird through the helicopter's camera-eyes. Huge though it was, the woman's weight was burden enough to make flight very difficult, and Charlotte wondered whether the creature had sufficient strength left to make landfall.

"It is clear," said Oscar, "that the murders were committed partly in order to lay a trail. We shall be the first to reach its end, but by no means the last. Every news service in the world must have dispatched spy-eyes by now. We are about to attend an exhibition, dear Charlotte—one which will put the so-called Great Exhibition of 2505 to shame."

"We picked up enough body-cells at McCandless's house to produce a DNA-spectrum," Hal put in. "The lab people didn't expect any kind of correlation with the people who were registered as Julia Herold's parents, but they found one. According to her genes, Herold is Maria Inacio, saving some slight somatic modifications compatible with cosmetic transformation. Inacio's alleged death in 2423 must be disinformation."

"No," said Oscar, softly. "Maria Inacio was born in 2402; there's no way that she could be Rappaccini's daughter. You won't find Julia Herold's birth recorded anywhere, Dr. Watson. She was born from an artificial womb on the island, not more than twenty years ago."

"A clone!" said Charlotte. "An unregistered clone! But she's *not* his daughter. You were wrong about that."

"In the literal sense, yes," admitted Oscar, as the bird summoned the last vestiges of its strength for one last surge toward the silver strand where the waves were breaking over Dr. Moreau's island, "but he's raised her from infancy within the confines of his own Garden of Eden, and I'll wager that he has exactly the same degree of genetic relatedness to her as he would have to a daughter: 50 percent."

"You mean," said Charlotte, "that she's his *sister!*"

"No," said Oscar, clenching his fist in a tiny gesture of sympathetic triumph as the bird dropped the girl into the sand and lurched exhaustedly to a sprawling landing twenty meters further on. "I mean that Maria Inacio was Rappaccini's *mother.*"

"I suppose you've worked out who his father was, as well?" said Charlotte, as the helicopter zoomed in to land. The helicopter's safety-minded AIs gave the beached roc a wide berth, putting them down sixty meters away from the point where the woman had been dropped; she had already picked herself up and disappeared into the trees fringing the beach. Charlotte unplugged her waistphone from the comcon. She didn't bother unshipping any transmitter-eyes. Hal would soon have plenty of eyes with which to see. The whole world was coming to *this* party.

"We can narrow it down to one of six," said Oscar, as he opened the door and climbed out of the slightly tilted helicopter. "Perhaps that's as far as Rappaccini cared to narrow it down. It's possible, if McCandless's half-recollection of a beach-party at which all six of the victims might or might not have been present means anything at all, that Maria Inacio was uncertain which of them was the father of her child. I strongly

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suspect, though, that a genetic engineer of Rappaccini's skill and dedication could not have been content with any such uncertainty."

Charlotte looked uneasily along the strand at the chimerical creature that was peering at them dolefully from an unnaturally large and bloodily crimson eye. "It was Walter Czastka," she said, knowing that she could claim no credit simply for filling in the blank.

"It was Walter Czastka," he echoed. "Poor Walter! To harbor such genius in his genes, and such mediocrity in his poor mortal body."

Charlotte wasn't about to waste time feeling sorry for Walter Czastka—not, at any rate, for *that* reason—but she couldn't help feeling a pang of sympathy for poor Maria Inacio, dead before her life had really begun, leaving nothing behind but a child of uncertain parentage. Such things couldn't happen nowadays, when all children were sterilized as a matter of course—and only a tiny minority ever applied for desterilization in order to exercise their right of reproduction while they were still alive—but Maria Inacio had been a child of the Aftermath. Hers had been the last generation of women victimized by their own fertility.

Charlotte and Oscar walked side by side to the place where Rappaccini's mother/daughter had disappeared. They kept a wary eye on the roc, but the bird made no move toward them. It seemed to be in considerable distress. As they paused before moving into the trees, Charlotte saw the bloodshot eyes close. They walked into the forest, following a grassy pathway that had all the appearance of an accident of nature, but which had in fact been designed with the utmost care, as had every blade of grass.

The trunk of every tree had grown into the shape of something else, as finely wrought in bronze-barked wood as any sculpture. No two were exactly alike: here was the image of a dragon rampant, here a mermaid, here a trilobite, and here a shaggy faun. Many were the images of beasts that natural selection had designed to walk on four legs, but all of those stood upright here, rearing back to extend their forelimbs, separately or entwined, high into the air. These upraised forelimbs provided bases for spreading crowns of many different colors. Some few of the crowns extended from an entire host of limbs rather than a single pair, originating from the maws of krakens or the stalks of hydras.

The animals whose shapes were reproduced by the trunks of the trees all had open eyes, which seemed always to be looking at Charlotte no matter where she was in relation to them, and although she knew that they were all quite blind, she could not help feeling discomfited by their seeming curiosity. Her own curiosity, however, was more than equal to theirs. Every tree of the forest was in flower, and every flower was as bizarre as the plant which bore it. There was a noticeable preponderance of reds and blacks. Butterflies and birds moved ceaselessly through the branches, each one wearing its own coat of many colors, and the tips of the branches moved as though stirred by a breeze, reaching out towards these visitors as though to touch their faces. There was no wind: the

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branches moved by their own volition, according to their own mute purpose.

Charlotte knew that almost all of what she saw was illicit. Creationists were banned from engineering insects and birds, lest their inventions stray to pollute the artwork of other engineers, or to disrupt the domestic ecosystems of the recently renewed world-at-large. When the final accounting was complete, and all of Rappaccini's felonies and misdemeanors had been tabulated by careful AIs, he would probably turn out to have been the most prolific criminal who had ever lived upon the surface of the earth. Rappaccini had given birth to an extraordinary fantasy, fully aware that it would be destroyed almost as soon as others found out what he had done—but he had found a way to show it off first, and to command that attention be paid to it by every man, woman, and child in the world. Had he, perhaps, hoped that his contemporaries might be so overawed as to reckon him a *god,* far above the petty laws of humankind? Had he dared to believe that they might *condone* what he had done, once they saw it in all its glory?

Rappaccini's creative fecundity had not been content with birds and insects. There were monkeys in the trees, which did not hide or flee from the visitors of their demi-paradise, but came instead to stare with patient curiosity. The monkeys had the slender bodies of gibbons and lorises, but they had the wizened faces of old men. Nor was this simply the generic resemblance that had once been manifest in the faces of long-extinct New World monkeys; *these* faces were actual human faces, writ small. Charlotte recognized a family of Czastkas and an assortment of Kings and Urashimas, but there were dozens she did not know. She felt that her senses were quite overloaded. The moist atmosphere was a riot of perfumes, and the murmurous humming of insect wings composed a subtle symphony.

Is it beautiful? Charlotte asked herself, as she studied the sculpted trees staring at her with their illusory eyes, marveling at their hectic crowns and their luminous flowers. *Or is it mad?*

It *was* beautiful: more beautiful than anything she had ever seen or ever hoped to see. It was much more beautiful than the ghostly echoes of Ancient Nature that modern men called wilderness, doubtless more beautiful than Ancient Nature itself—even in all its pre-Devastation glory—could ever have been. Charlotte could see, even with her unschooled eyes, that it was the work of a *young* man. However many years Rappaccini had lived, however many he had spent in glorious isolation in the midst of all this strange fecundity, he had never grown old. This was not the work of a man grown mournful in forgetfulness; this was the work of a man whose only thought was of the future that he would not live to see: its novelty, its ambition, its progress. This was Moreau's island, by which its creator meant *morrow's* island.

It was mad, too, but its madness was essentially divine.

In the heart of the island, she expected to find a house, but there was none. There was only a mausoleum. She knew that Moreau's body could

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not be inside it, because he had died in Honolulu, but it was nevertheless his tomb. It was hewn from a white marble whose austerity stood in imperious contrast to the fabulous forest around it. It bore neither cross, nor carven angel, nor any inscription.

"Like you and I, dear Charlotte," Oscar said, "Jafri Biasiolo was delivered by history to the very threshold of true immortality, and yet was fated not to live in the Promised Land. How he must have resented the fading of the faculties which had produced *all this!* How wrathful he must have become, to see his fate mirrored in the faces and careers of all those who might—had the whim of chance dictated it—have been his father. When the true immortals emerge from the womb of biotechnical artifice, they will no longer care about who their fathers were or might have been, for they will indeed be *designed*, by men like gods, from common chromosomal clay. He, alas, was not."

Charlotte looked around curiously as she spoke, wondering where the woman might be. "*He* may be dead," she reminded Oscar, grimly, "but his accomplice and executioner will have to stand trial."

"Yes, of course," he murmured. "She must settle her own account with the recording angels of the Celestial Net." So saying, he walked around the massive mausoleum. Charlotte followed him.

The woman was sitting on the pediment on the further side of the tomb, facing a crowd of leaping lions and prancing unicorns, vaulting hippogriffs and rearing cobras, all hewn in living wood beneath a roof of rainbows. Hundreds of man-faced monkeys were solemnly observing the scene. Her vivid green eyes were staring vacuously into space. It was as though she could not see the fantastic host which paraded itself before her. She was quite bald, and the dome of her skull was starred with a thousand tiny contact-points, glistening in the sunlight. The golden red wig that she had worn lay like stranded sea-weed between her feet. In her left hand, she held a flower: a gorgeously gilded rose. In her right hand was a curious skull-cap, made of exceedingly fine metal mesh.

Oscar Wilde picked up the gilded rose, and placed it carefully in his buttonhole, where he was accustomed to wearing a green carnation. Charlotte picked up the skull-cap, and turned it over in her hands, marveling at its thinness, its lightness, and its awesome complexity.

"What is it?" she asked, as her eyes dutifully compared its shape to the contours of the girl's strangely decorated skull.

"I imagine," said Oscar, "that it is your murderer's accomplice and executioner: Rappaccini's daughter. The Virtual Individual which has moved this Innocent Eve through the world, fascinating her appointed victims and luring them to the acceptance of her fatal kisses, is the vengeful ghost of Rappaccini himself, left behind to settle *all* his accounts on earth. When your Court of Judgment sits, *that* will be the only guilty party that can be summoned to appear before it. No part of this project originated within the mind and purpose of the girl herself. You may add trafficking in illegal brainfeed equipment to the seemingly endless list of Dr. Moreau's crimes."

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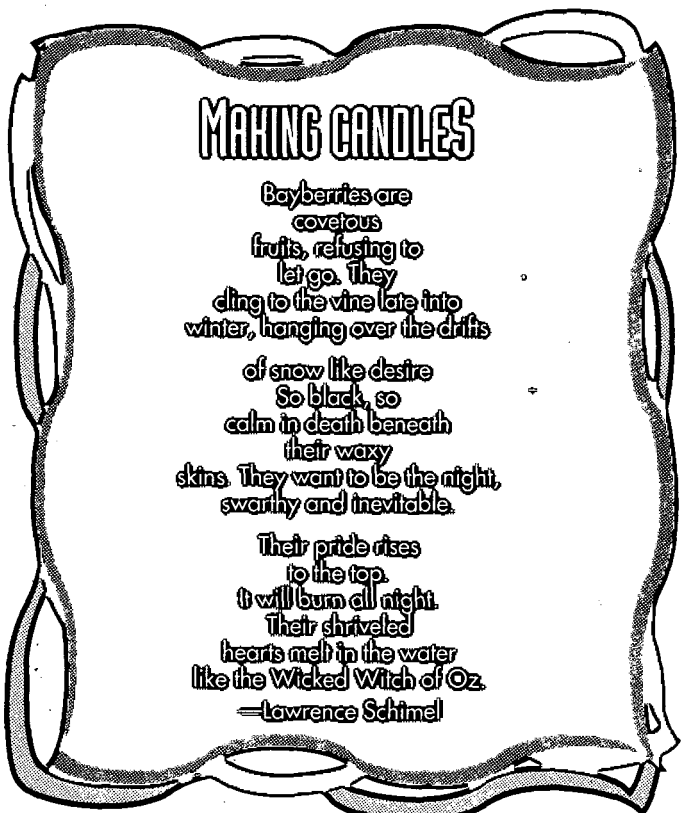
Charlotte let out her breath in a long, deep sigh that sounded exactly like one of Oscar Wilde's. She looked up into the little tent of blue sky above the mausoleum, which marked the clearing in which they were standing. Already, the sky was full of flying eyes.

This is Rappaccini's funeral, she thought, *and all of this was his last gift to himself: his last and finest wreath. It's a great symbolic circle woven out of life and death, laying claim to the only kind of immortality he could design for himself. Everybody in the world has been invited, to mock or mourn or marvel as they please.*

The eyes, she knew, had ears as well. The words that she and Oscar spoke could be heard by thousands of people all over the world, and would in time be relayed to billions. Oscar was looking upward too, with a curious smile on his face.

"It was, after all," he said, wryly, "a perfect murder." ○



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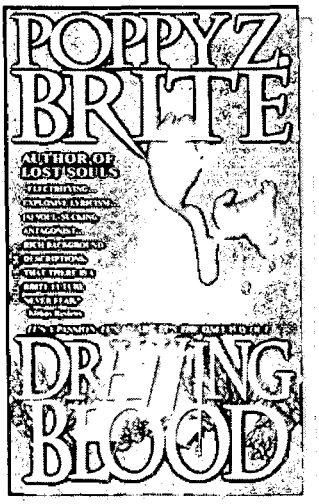

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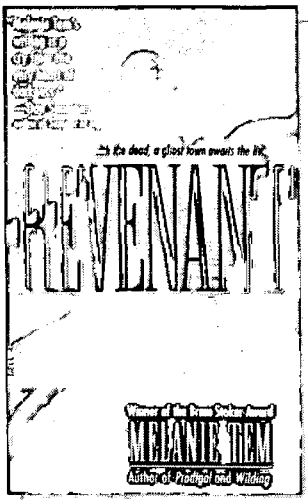

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ON BOOKS

by Peter Heck

Foreigner
by C.J. Cherryh
DAW, $20.00

The subtitle of Cherryh's latest is "A Novel of First Contact," which seems at first misleading. The actual first contact, in the usual sense of an initial meeting of humans and aliens, takes place very early in the book, and the bulk of the story is set nearly two hundred years afterward. But in the larger sense, of learning for the first time how the other race sees and responds to the universe, the description is apt. Cherryh's in-depth examination of the relationship of one isolated human with his alien hosts—a blunter term would be "kidnappers"—is full of the clashes of viewpoint that are at the center of the classic "first contact" story.

The novel begins with two truncated episodes; one describes how a lost interstellar expedition from Earth made the desperate decision to head for the nearest sun offering the likelihood of habitable planets; the other takes place at the colony established by the lost ship, with a tantalizingly brief description of the actual first contact between the human settlers and the natives of the planet, warlike humanoids who call themselves atevi. These two narratives, either of which might in itself be the basis for an entire novel, are disposed of in less than fifty pages. Then Cherryh settles down to her real subject, the story of a human diplomat, the paidhi, who finds himself in the midst of what he gradually realizes is a civil war in the alien society. And he realizes that he barely understands the people among whom he has been living and working for years.

Badly outnumbered and too far from home even to dream of outside help, the human colony on the atevi world is isolated on a large offshore island. Its only protection is bribery: little bits of higher technology leaked to the atevi in exchange for continued peace. The only human contact with the atevi is the paidhi, an office currently held by Bren Cameron, who awakens one night to find an armed intruder—an assassin—breaking into his room. Cameron fires two shots with an illegal gun before security arrives. But what might in other circumstances be merely a bungled assassination (the most common means of settling disputes among the atevi) has dangerous consequences. The paidhi is, in

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part because of his office, the protected guest of a powerful local leader, Tabini. At first, Cameron is at a loss to explain what has happened; the assassin must have been looking for someone else. But gradually, he comes to understand that he was the target for the first shots in a war meant to drive the human colonists from the planet once and for all.

Cameron is spirited away to Malguri, the country estate of Tabini's grandmother—a powerful atevi woman of rigidly old-fashioned values, whose sympathy for the humans is suspect at best. There he finds himself in a paranoia-inducing quasi-imprisonment: held incommunicado, although the servants assure him that communications will be restored shortly, that his luggage will arrive soon, that it would be better if he waited for events to sort themselves out. At the same time, he finds himself being tested by the dowager: served possibly poisonous teas—by mistake, or knowingly?—and given mandatory early-morning riding lessons on the large local quadrupeds that resemble tusked horses. A series of power outages may or may not be incidents of sabotage. And there is another attempt on his life, thwarted by the dowager's servants.

Unexpectedly, he is confronted with an atevi TV newscaster asking for an interview; unable to contact his superiors for permission, he is reluctant—until he realizes that once again he has no choice but to comply. He stumbles through the session with a minimum of gaffes, fending off questions on how humans decide which bit of technology to release to the atevi and whether considerations other than protecting the environment ever enter into the process. He has begun to realize that not just his own life, but the entire future of the human presence on the planet depends on the two races arriving at a new understanding. But achieving it will mean overcoming deep-seated beliefs on both sides, as he learns when one of the dowager's staff interrogates him on whether humans have given the atevi inaccurate scientific data—a question that is loaded with religious significance for the atevi, who place great importance on numerology.

Abruptly, Cameron's situation deteriorates even further: he is put under guard, and subjected to frankly hostile questioning. It becomes obvious that the political stakes have gone up another notch. The differences between human and atevi world views take on stark meaning to him—he remembers that the atevi language has fourteen distinct words for different kinds of betrayal, and wonders which applies to his own situation. The plot becomes more and more convoluted, until Cameron comes out the other side of a shattering experience that forces him to question everything he has taken for granted. And by this time, the reader clearly understands the meaning of the subtitle; until Cameron's traumatic ordeal, the two races have never really met.

Cherryh's novels are rarely straightforward, leisurely reads with clear distinctions between the good guys and the villains. *Foreigner* is no exception. The build-

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ing tension and the ambiguity of Cameron's situation are heightened by his unwilling immersion in a society that he barely understands, and in which he is never certain of his own value to either side—very much like the protagonists of LeCarré's best spy thrillers. Cherryh's ability to create convincingly alien cultures and her willingness to keep the reader in suspense make reading this novel a challenging experience, well worth the work.

The Iron Dragon's Daughter
by Michael Swanwick
AvoNova, $23.00

Swanwick's work is never easy to classify; this striking novel of a human child kidnapped by elves has affinities to everything from Dickens's industrial morality plays to Emma Bull's "elfpunk," laced with an off-the-wall sense of humor that is unmistakably Swanwick's.

The novel begins in the indentured children's dorm of a dragon factory; in this world, dragons are the equivalent of artificially intelligent warplanes. The protagonist is Jane, one of an oppressed group of child laborers plotting the magical destruction of their vicious overseer, Blugg. She reluctantly agrees to sneak into Blugg's office and obtain clippings from his fingernails to give the children the power to destroy him magically. During her raid, she comes across a discarded grimoire: a manual of specifications for a dragon. She steals it, unknowingly beginning the process of bonding herself to one of the factory's disused dragons. The ringleader of the coup—a boy named Rooster—creates a distraction while Jane steals the clippings and the grimoire, and is beaten severely.

Rooster's injuries create a crisis among the indentured children, and much of the blame falls on Jane's head. When the spells aimed at Blugg fail, she finds herself more and more isolated from her co-workers—especially after Blugg picks her out as an unwilling instrument of his grand plan to rise in the corporation. The horrors of factory life are heightened by Swanwick's true-to-life portrayal of the casual cruelty of children to one another and of the brutal power their overseers wield. Yet at the same time this is unmistakably a fantasy world: her co-workers in the dragon factory include trolls, dwarves, and shapeshifters, and the elite executives are coolly aristocratic elves. There is also the occasional hint of the world from which Jane has been abducted. Rooster, in his delirium, babbles "nonsense"—"Lucky Strike Means Fine Tobacco," and other advertising taglines and political slogans. And she gets a tantalizing glimpse into the world of the very rich, and a seductive hint that perhaps she might become some part of it.

Jane eventually takes command of a dragon and escapes from the factory, only to end up living alone on the outskirts of a city. She attends a public high school much like those in our world, despite the curriculum's emphasis on magic and the high proportion of fantastic beings in the student body. Several things shift into focus; the reader becomes more aware of re-

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peating patterns in Jane's life, especially as she learns that a boy to whom she is attracted shares a secret true name with Rooster. A mediocre student and a target for bullying teachers, Jane discovers that she has a talent for shoplifting, which gains her a certain amount of prestige among her fellow outcasts. She finds a strange fascination in the career of Gwen, the beautiful girl chosen as the wicker queen, doomed to be sacrificed after a year of glamour and freedom. Equally fascinating and repellent is the society of the meryons, antlike beings who create a tiny fascist microcosm in the shelter of the now-dormant dragon. And she begins to learn more about what it means to be a changeling.

After a traumatic conclusion to her high school career, Jane pulls strings and gains admission to a university, studying higher forms of magic and wondering whether she will ever catch up with her more talented rivals. Once again, the patterns of her life begin to repeat themselves, with subtle variations and twists. Her life begins to be dominated by fear of the Teind, a mysterious apocalyptic event that she knows will destroy a large number of students and that she fears may end her university career. Her former lives seem to be cropping up at unexpected intervals: an old boyfriend shows up, pressuring her to resume her shoplifting career; the dragon reappears in her life, sullenly directing her toward some still-unspecified act of rebellion. She begins to get a taste of life on the super-rich fringes of elvish society, culminating in an attempted burglary at the apartment of a decadent elf she and a friend meet in an off-campus nightclub. At last the Teind arrives, riotous and deadly dangerous; somehow she survives, and goes on to the next stage of her life, as a hanger-on in elvish social circles, once again an outsider on the fringes of a group she isn't entirely sure she'd want to belong to if she could.

Swanwick ultimately brings Jane's career to an appropriate conclusion, building on hints dropped at various points throughout the novel. Despite its wide range of social milieus, the novel is tightly structured, with recurring motifs emerging from the stream of events and characters in new and surprising, yet seemingly inevitable ways. Swanwick gets great mileage out of building up the usual trappings of the coming-of-age novel and then giving them an elfin twist to make them fit into his fantasy world. He has great fun inventing strange parallels to suburban high school life and student life in the megaversity, taking the familiar and distorting it ever so slightly. From the names of fashionable shops ("la jettatura") and rock bands ("Bloodaxe") to the unexpected appearance of a stanza of Keats in a student poetry reading, Swanwick imports whole worlds of reference with every allusion, and rarely hits a false note.

Swanwick's writing has grown impressively in stature from his very interesting first novel, *In the Drift,* to his Nebula-winning *Stations of the Tide. The Iron Dragon's Daughter* may be his most fully realized novel yet; accessible and evocative at the same time, finely

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structured yet building inexorably to its final confrontation and the revelations that await beyond it. Highly recommended.

Rude Astronauts
by Allen Steele
Old Earth Books, $15.00 (trade pb); $85.00 (limited ed. hc)

This collection of short fiction and essays, many of which appeared in *Asimov's,* is Steele's first. At present it is available only in this attractive small press edition from Old Earth Books. Those who have read Steele's novels will find many of their qualities in these shorter pieces: a matter-of-fact working class sensibility and a clean unpretentious prose style not least among them.

As his novels also suggest, Steele's imagination seems most at home in the comparatively near future, what might be called the frontier era of space exploration. The book's three main divisions are "Near Space," "Alternate Space," and "Contemporary Space," and none of the stories looks much farther afield than Mars. In fact, a considerable fraction of them use the most commonplace settings imaginable to bring their action literally down to Earth. Three stories are told in Diamondback Jack's, a Florida redneck bar catering to space workers. Others take place in the hills of New England, or in the halls of an old Boston boarding house. Even those that take place off Earth tend to take as their focus the kinds of activities that make up the daily life of Everyman—smuggling beer onto a space station for a party, or starting the first rock band on Mars.

As with any collection of short fiction published over a period of years, *Rude Astronauts* depends primarily on its author's voice for whatever unity of tone it achieves. Still, there are thematic links between several of the pieces, notably the three "Diamondback Jack" stories and "Live From the Mars Hotel," all of which celebrate the entry of ordinary working men into the new frontier of space. Unlike the near-space stories of the early '50s, when the subject of space exploration still possessed the glamour of an unattained article of faith, Steele's stories present a future in which everyone can take part. There are practical jokes and beer blasts and live bands playing the oldies, and wild stories in the bars where the old-timers and burnt-out former heroes hang out and reminisce over drinks. And there are scandals and coverups and rumors for them to gossip over; some are even true.

Steele has occasionally drawn criticism for making his future too much like the present, with his portrayal of Deadheads in space cited as a particularly egregious failure of imagination. And of course the future won't be exactly the way he portrays it—Steele knows that as well as anyone. But he knows there'll be some sort of music that speaks to the working man, and the Grateful Dead are a clearer and more succinct metaphor for it than anything he could make up out of thin air. Better the Dead to start a tune going in the reader's mind than the invented future lyrics that so often fall flat as other writers try to infuse their

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made-up words with the resonance Steele can get just by mentioning a song title we all know. Steele knows that his audience is here and now, and he speaks in a language they can directly relate to.

Steele's two alternate histories are comparatively subtle and quiet, especially compared to some of the flamboyant "what-ifs" that fill so many theme anthologies nowadays. They are narrated matter-of-factly, focusing on small changes in the early history of the space program that might have made a difference in how we finally got to the moon. In one, Robert Goddard is recruited to run a rocket program in response to the Nazis' experiments, giving the space age a head start; in another, the first man on the Moon undertakes a small act of rebellion. Both stories convey a wistful notion of what the space program might well have been, in slightly different circumstances.

Two of the stories in the last section could just as easily have appeared in any magazine that publishes contemporary fiction. "Hapgood's Hoax" is a story about a science fiction fan who finds himself living in the same apartment house as one of his favorite writers. It effectively captures the elemental kick of discovering the stuff for the first time, and the greater kick of finding out there are others who share your love. Then Steele gives the story a sinister twist, although a thoroughly realistic one—and suddenly the story is about the betrayal of something once loved. Likewise "Winter Scenes of the Cold War," which is more or less a straight "spy vs. spy" story, has very little internal evidence that it is by a leading science fiction writer.

For contrast of another kind, there is "Trembling Earth," a hard-edged story of a trio of *deinonychus* recreated from fossilized cellular material and set free in a well-guarded tract of Georgia swampland. Steele's use of a pseudo-documentary style (much of the narrative is represented as the minutes of a congressional hearing) neatly sets off the raw terror of unprotected humans faced with these prehistoric killing machines.

Steele's non-fiction pieces here include a very brief piece on Goddard's first rocket launch, a longer one on the current state of the search for extraterrestrial intelligence, and a disturbing study of several survivalists. All are clear and cleanly written, and whet the reader's appetite for more of the same. A magazine looking for an occasional science columnist might do worse than to pick up Steele.

On the whole, this collection of Steele's short fiction is well worth hunting down. Ace has acquired the mass market paperback rights to the volume, and will probably publish its edition in 1995; until then, *Rude Astronauts* can be ordered from Old Earth Books, P.O. Box 19951, Baltimore, MD 21211. (Buyers of the limited edition hardcover will also receive the trade paperback as a reading copy, free of additional charge.)

The Voyage
By David Drake
Tor, $23.95

Not entirely without reason,

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heroism and epic grandeur may be at an all-time low as qualities mainstream American culture admires. Even in SF and fantasy, the two modes of fiction most attuned to capturing our dreams and aspirations, only a minority of writers still aspire to something so declassé as the high epic mode. So many readers may preemptorily dismiss David Drake's latest, a recasting of "The Golden Fleece" as military SF—a subgenre that has somehow managed to gather a popular following without ever having been fashionable. *The Voyage* is the tale of a high-stakes mercenary raid, set in the future of his "Hammer's Slammers" series. It is unflinching in its examination of what makes up a hero.

The basic plot parallels the story of Jason and the Argonauts very closely: a charismatic captain—in this case a woman, Lissea Doorman —and a crew of heroes undergo perilous adventures in exotic places, in the attempt to recover a treasure held by a powerful ruler on the distant planet Pancahte. (An Author's Note at the end summarizes some of the sources Drake draws on, and a few of the parallels with his classical precursors; alert readers may spot some of them before that point.) The hardware is of course upgraded to science fictional specifications—power guns and supertanks instead of swords and chariots, and fusion bottles instead of sails.

Drake's characters are, at first glance, the most unheroic types imaginable—brutal, cynical, hard-living and contentious. A prelaunch dinner party for the expedition members nearly turns into a riot; perhaps only the fact that the barely disciplined crewmen have checked their weapons at the door prevents actual bloodshed. And yet, since all of them know that they have signed on to what amounts to a suicide mission (a ruse to give the inconvenient Doorman heiress the appearance of a fair shot at the family fortune by giving her a quest everyone knows is impossible) their behavior seems entirely in character. Who else but a gang of borderline psychotics would even consider going on such a mission?

The reader sees most of the action through the eyes of Ned Slade, nephew of an important character in the main sequence of "Hammer's Slammers" books, and experienced in armored warfare. Slade arrives at the Pancahte expedition's headquarters on Telaria bearing the invitation sent to his uncle and almost at once finds himself butting heads with some of the older members of the expedition. But when the expedition's ship, the *Swift,* takes off, he is on board and ready for action.

The action begins at their first planetfall, a stop for supplies at Ajax Four. A human colony holding a precarious foothold on a world of hostile aliens welcomes the crew of the *Swift* as heroes; but on their way back to the ship from the settlement, the crew runs a gauntlet of fire from the indigenous Spiders, who were evidently in the process of massing for an attack on the human colony. The next stop is Mirandola, settled by political refugees who discovered, after landing, that the men of the colony had been sterilized by the

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medical authorities on the planet they had left. The women of the colony invite the *Swift*'s crewmen to help them prevent the colony from dying out after one generation; but not all of their husbands are content with the stratagem. . . . And so it goes, with the *Swift* landing on world after world and meeting one test after another: savage indigenous races, planets ravaged by past wars, orbiting sentinels prorammed to prevent outside contact, deadly plant life, pirates—all the obstacles the galaxy can throw at them. When at last they land on Pancahte, they are a thoroughly tested and seasoned crew.

But their greatest trials lie ahead of them. The rulers of Pancahte are reluctant to permit the *Swift*'s crew to fulfill their quest, and demand that first they neutralize a pair of powerful automatic tanks—the equivalent of Keith Laumer's Bolos. Here Slade's armored warfare experience comes into play—although even he is not prepared for what happens when they succeed at their task. Then it's a race home, pursued by the Pancahtean space forces, to an uncertain reception back on Telaria; all they are sure of is that they weren't expected to return alive, and that having survived will not make them welcome.

As his readers have come to expect, Drake handles the action scenes exceptionally well, and he shows great ingenuity in inventing science fictional equivalents of the various episodes of the story of the Argonauts. He manages to integrate the mythic material into a very credible future human-colonized galaxy, combining the sweep of space opera with strong world-building. But his greatest accomplishment here is taking a group of men whom most of his readers would find frightening, even repellent, and showing them as the true raw material of heroism. Drake does not prettify the violence, nor does he pretend that it is all in a higher cause; Lissea Doorman's right to claim her own inheritance is scant justification for the events of the apocalyptic final chapters. But in the end Drake manages to win the reader's admiration for his heroes. This may well be his strongest novel to date.

Five Hundred Years After
by Steven Brust
Tor, $23.95

Like *The Phoenix Guards,* to which it is a sequel, Brust's latest is set in the Dragaeran Empire, the locale of his popular series of fantasies featuring the wizard/assassin Vlad Taltos. This marvelously decadent fantasy world has a great deal in common with *ancien regime* France—quite deliberately so, since the two books are in part retellings of *The Three Musketeers* and its sequel *Twenty Years After.* But while the Vlad novels are the equivalent in both style and structure of hard-boiled detective stories with a fantasy setting, the two Phoenix Guards novels pay homage to the older, more baroque stylistic tradition of Dumas and his contemporaries.

The ostensible "author" of the book is Paarfi of Roundwood, an academic who defies his superiors by dabbling in the disreputable field of historical fiction. Writing in an

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elaborate and elegantly circumlocutory style, Paarfi shows considerable nostalgia for the manners and institutions of the vanished era in which he writes. His characters sometimes seem incapable of stating anything directly, especially when dealing with a superior. (Often enough, the superior will finally run out of patience and ask someone to get to the point.) And Paarfi himself is fond of stopping for long digressive descriptions, then hurrying to catch up to the action, which has gone on without him.

As the novel opens, we learn that the empire is in a financial crisis; not only are funds running short, but many of the nobles, who have been summoned to a Meeting of the Principalities to discuss the Imperial Allowance, have been finding excuses not to appear. They report crop shortages, labor troubles, unexpected military expenditures; it does not take much foresight to notice that a tax revolt is brewing. But the long-lived Dragaerans are arch-conservatives at heart; any race that measures its life span in centuries will be reluctant to admit the possibility of sudden and drastic changes in the world. And so, while the Emperor Tortaalik worries about ways to resolve the financial crisis, it does not occur to him that anything more serious is at hand.

From that beginning, Brust builds a complicated plot that puts a colorful ensemble cast through everything from love scenes to pitched battles, all told in Paarfi's unhurried idiosyncratic style. For the most part, the narrative follows the lead characters of *Phoenix Guards,* who have grown older and found positions of importance in the five centuries since the earlier book. Almost equally significant is the Imperial Palace itself, a rich setting that is described in loving detail. As in his earlier *Brokedown Palace,* Brust has created a setting that not only serves as a background for the action, but that pervades the entire atmosphere of the book, as in the scenes where an assassin penetrates the palace and tries to make his escape after his coup is thwarted. Brust does not neglect his other settings, from the backroom of a tavern to the apartments of Captain Khaavren, one of the "Three Musketeers" of *Phoenix Guards.*

Eventually, the complex plot strands combine to bring about a climax—one that very few readers will have guessed was in the offing from the opening chapters, although a number of hints suddenly fall into place once the reader understands where everything has been heading. It would be close to criminal to spoil a plot so complex and satisfying for anyone who is likely to enjoy such things. Let's say that the novel ends with the world transformed, with most of the main characters faced with finding a new way of life, and with seeds planted for still another story set in this richly detailed fantasy world.

Brust's two "Dragaeran novels" for Tor are in some ways polar opposites of his "Vlad Taltos" books for Ace, as different as Alexandre Dumas from Robert B. Parker; and not everyone who enjoys the one series will necessarily enjoy the other. But those who appreciate a

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richly orchestrated style in which the play of language is as important as the plot, and in which setting and atmosphere are developed as fully as any of the characters are likely to find this book very much to their tastes.

Larque On the Wing
by Nancy Springer
AvoNova, $20.00

Springer's latest is an off-the-wall contemporary fantasy that refuses to fit in any of the normal boxes—much like her protagonist, Larque, who begins the novel as a fortyish small town housewife, and who metamorphoses into a strange variety of beings, much to the consternation of her family. Even Larque herself is somewhat nonplussed when she finds herself changing gender, becoming not just a male, but a young gay male.

The first chapter sets the stage: Larque is busily cranking out one of an endless stream of paintings of cows (she describes herself as a "crafter of home decorations products"), thinking how content she is with her present state of life. Then a doppelganger—Sky, a thirty-years younger version of herself—appears and begins to mock her. Larque matter-of-factly writes off Sky as a physical manifestation of menopause; after all, this is not the first time she has called up a doppelganger out of her unconscious. It only begins to bother her when, the next morning, she finds Sky in her studio painting a huge canvas. Sky accuses Larque of breaking her promises—"you were going to be a truthteller"—and then proceeds to destroy all of Larque's paintings before running away. Staring at Sky's huge painting, Larque realizes that it contains an image of her unfulfilled childhood dream of becoming a cowboy.

At this point, the novel jumps back in time, to Argent and Shadow, two gay men meeting in a clandestine pickup park in the early '60s. Shadow is a mysterious and beautiful newcomer to the area, an embodiment of visionary yearning for freedom, able to articulate middle-aged Argent's aspirations. And when the two arrive at a cheap motel, Argent is wearing a cowboy hat, an echo of Larque's unfulfilled aspirations.

After the visit from her doppelganger, Larque's life changes course abruptly. She can't paint; she leaves the house to search for Sky, and finds herself on Popular Street—an alternate world where fantasies of freedom come true. There, instead of finding Sky, she begins to find missing dimensions of her own sexuality. She returns home changed—and her family senses it.

From here, Larque's odyssey leads her into progressively stranger territory. She visits her mother, Florrie, who has gone off the deep end for fad religions—currently the Holistic Church of Inner Unity. Sky reappears, although only certain people can see her. Larque's shiftless husband, Hoot, quits still another in a long string of jobs. Larque vacillates between searching for employment in a dildo factory—an industry that doesn't seem to have established itself in her part of Pennsylvania—and going on a search for her long-lost father, whom she eventually finds. And gradually she be-

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gins to metamorphose into a man.

Springer steers Larque through a disturbing odyssey that veers unpredictably between knee-slappingly comic portraits of small town life and nightmarish psychodrama. At one moment Springer will unerringly skewer some small-minded denizen of the American hinterlands, at another peer deep into the soul of a woman on the edge of breaking apart. Larque's family, especially Hoot, are alternately the objects of scathing satire and of warm understanding. Larque's liaisons with Argent and Shadow create a major disturbance in her relationship with her family; but as the novel progresses, it becomes clear that only by shattering the existing relationships can they be reassembled into anything that has a chance to live.

Larque on the Wing is a difficult and disturbing book—and yet at times an uproariously funny one. It has almost nothing in common with the popular adventure tales that the word "fantasy" evokes for most readers; anyone looking for that sort of light entertainment will do far better elsewhere. But Larque's quest for identity, love, and family is as full of magic and peril as anything in the fantasy shelves of the bookstores. Springer may confuse or repel a good portion of the readers who pick up this book, but those who approach it with an open mind will find the novel both satisfying and illuminating. ●

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Some overseas cons, then the traditional cons leading up to WorldCon. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on clubs and fanzines, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 101 S. Whiting #700, Alexandria, VA 22304. The hot line is (703) 461-8645. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons as Filthy Pierre, with a musical keyboard. —Erwin S. Strauss

AUGUST 1994

19-21—**CascadeCon.** For info, write: **Box 86734, Portland OR 97286.** Or phone: **(503) 777-0537** (10 A.M. to 10 P.M., not collect). Con will be held in: Portland OR (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Shilo. Guests will include: Steve Perry, Mel Gilden, Betty Bigelow. Relaxacon at a country inn.

17-30—**Apollo/Soyuz Anniversary. (301) 681-2026.** Moscow, Russia. Recall 1974's US/USSR mission.

18-21—**GenCon.** MECCA Convention Center, Milwaukee WI. Up to 20,000 expected at this gaming meet.

19-21—**Japan National Con. (+81-6) 973-7595.** Okinawa, Japan. Strong on Japan's animation/comics.

19-21—**PrisonerCon.** Portmeirion UK. Where the TV show "The Prisoner" was filmed ("The Village").

26-28—**DeepSouthCon.** Radisson, Birmingham AL. Bujold, Resnick, Shaw, Maxwell, Hughes.

26-28—**BuboniCon. (505) 266-8905.** Howard Johnsons East, Albuquerque NM. Stackpole, Danforth, Hawke.

26-28—**Ballad Trek. (704) 253-9981.** Radisson, Asheville NC. 100 to 150 usually attend here.

27—**Flinty's Birthday, Box 100, Flin Flon MB R8A 1M6.** Civic day of town named after SF character.

27-28—**VulKon. (305) 434-6060.** North Marriott, Ft. Lauderdale FL. A commercial Star Trek event.

27-28—**LanternCon. (701) 235-2562.** Holiday Inn, 13th Ave. S. at I-29, Fargo ND. A comics meet.

SEPTEMBER 1994

1-5—**ConAdian, Box 2430, Winnipeg MB R3C 4A7. (204) 942-9494.** WorldCon. Over C$165 at the door.

1-5—**FantastiCon, 3368 N. 51st Blvd., Milwaukee WI 53216. (414) 871-1502.** Riviera, Las Vegas NV.

8-11—**Tage der Phantastik, Box 2120, Wetzlar 1 D-35573, Germany. (06441) 99-570 voice, -395 fax.**

9-11—**Spy Fi Con, 261 Central Ave., Box 205, Jersey City NJ 07307.** Newark NJ. UNCLE, etc., fans.

9-11—**Epsilon Alpha, Box 23167, Belleville IL 62223. (913) 677-6535.** St. Louis MO. Star Trek con.

9-11—**ImperiCon, 24026 21st Ave. S., Seattle WA 98198. (206) 365-1740.** Dates estimated; in Sept.

9-11—**ShoreCon, 142 South St. #9C, Red Bank NJ 07701. (908) 530-5211.** Gaming, SF, Comics.

10—**FalCon, Box 444, Sherman CT 06784. (203) 746-5384.** Adv. Dungeons & Dragons gaming.

10-11—**LanternCon, 540 Broadway, Fargo ND 58102 (phone above).** Conv. Center, Duluth MN. Comics.

AUGUST 1995

24-28—**Intersection, Box 15430, Washington DC 20003.** Glasgow UK. The WorldCon. $95 to 9/30/94.

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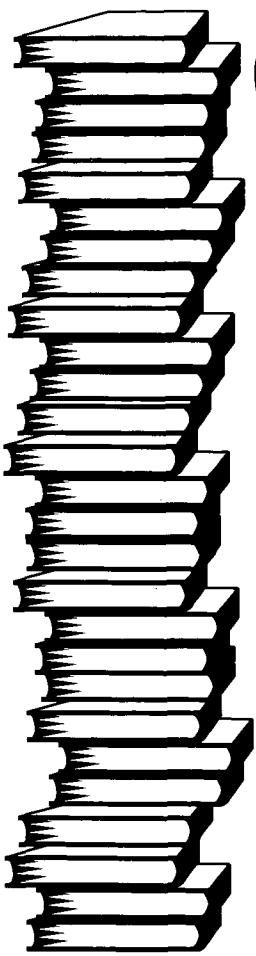

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